

The Secrets of the Red Dragon
(Beginning)



Author: TL

I am eternally grateful to Almighty God for all the blessings given to me, especially the ability to write this book.

This book is my gift for all children of this world, especially, who grew up without parental care and for all people who walk through life with unseen scars.

To the souls who carry the weight of loneliness and loss,

THIS IS FOR YOU!

As I wrote above this book is a gift for many people, but there are two persons whom I would like to say THANK YOU from the depth of my heart.

Dear huR,

Thank you for being an inspiration for me since my teenage years, only thanks to YOU, the BLOOD of the Red Dragon ARE BLACK. I am sure, you will understand that this message is only for you. Thank you very much for taking care of me. You cannot imagine how many times you saved me with your invisible support. This is a gift dedicated to cultural-moral renaissance. RED DRAGON ALWAYS READY FOR ORDERS FROM SNAKE EATING ITS TAIL. THE LITTLE CROW GREW UP, THE LITTLE DROP KNEW THAT IT WAS THE SEA =)

To the man with ocean eyes,
The one I called love without speaking his name.
You turned your pain into a canvas,
And painted the world with resilience and hope.
In a world where everyone listens to your music and words,
I could listen to the voice of your beautiful soul,
And it was the last drop of my inspiration
To start writing this book.
In your quiet strength, I saw a reflection of my heart,
In your golden-blue light, I found a place to dream.
This story carries a piece of you,
A tribute to the man who unknowingly became my muse.

Dear J....

I sincerely believe that one day you will heal from all your traumas, learn to give that little boy in your heart the love he needs, and when the time comes, you will be the greatest PAPA the world has ever seen. And then both your inner child and your parents will be proud of you. No matter where you are in the world, I wish you to be happy with all my sincere feelings. I love you, I'm so proud of you, LITTLE Prince <3 =)

New York (nowadays)

The camera pans across the bustling streets of New York City, zooming in on the throngs of people moving below. The view shifts upwards, revealing a towering skyscraper, its glass exterior reflecting the city lights. The scene transitions to the 50th floor, where a young lady stands by a panoramic window, gazing down at the crowd below.

Chopin's Nocturne in E-flat major, Op. 9, No. 2, softly plays in the background, adding a hauntingly beautiful ambiance to the scene. The lady's silhouette is elegant and composed, exuding an air of quiet power and contemplation.

Suddenly, the door opens, and a gentleman enters the room.

- I apologize for disturbing you, Miss. The meeting members have arrived and, as chairwoman, they are awaiting your presence.

The lady does not turn but acknowledges his words with a slight nod.

- I see. If there is nothing else, you may withdraw.

She raises her right hand, a graceful gesture granting him permission to leave. He bows deeply, then exits the room, closing the door softly behind him. Now alone, the lady continues to gaze out of the window. Her lips curl into a faint, enigmatic smile as she speaks to herself.

- Hmm, finally... Finally, all the 'players of the dirty game' are collected in the same place.

She turns slightly, her face still hidden from view, and the music swells, enhancing the sense of mystery and anticipation. Suddenly all of memories came to her mind about how the story started.

Chapter 1

"The Beginning of the Miracles"

Almas stood on the small balcony of her room in Budva, Montenegro, looking out over the mountain landscape surrounding her hometown. The sun was setting, casting a warm light on the landscape. Almas's thoughts were far from the scene in front of her. Life in Budva was simple but difficult. Every day, she passed through narrow, stone-walled streets decorated with old buildings that tell both the history of the rich past and the hardships of present life.

Known as the "Metropolis of Montenegrin Tourism", Budva is famous for its well-preserved medieval city walls, sandy beaches and lively nightlife. The Old City, called "Stariy Grad", is like a labyrinth of narrow streets and small squares with many cafes, restaurants and boutiques. It is a city that attracts guests from all over the world, with a perfect blend of past and present.

Despite its charms, Budva, like any city, had its challenges, of course. Although the bustling market was full of seafood and handicrafts, it was the daily "battle arena" of the economic struggle many residents faced. Almas's family was no exception. Although they ran a small boarding house in the old town, they were financially poor. Tourism, which boosted Budva's economy, could not benefit the local population all year round, unfortunately.

However, Almas's main difficulty in living in the family where she was born was not due to money. Fights, tears and violence were never absent in this family where there was no love because her the parents were forced to marry each other by their own parents. The mutual sense of hate between her parents had a place in every memory of Almas's childhood, thus becoming the main reason for her longing for love, which she only found in the pages of books.

Books were her magical world. From a young age, Almas gets to mentally run away to the worlds created by writers, lived the lives of the heroes written there, and tried to feel their emotions. She read works written about love, adventure and triumph in one breath, she truly believed that one day she would find true love in real life, just like in fairy tales. The reason why she chose her higher education in

the field of architecture was to be able to design the spaces of her dreams and give people there a place where they can live happily. Contrary to the house she lived in, in the house she designed for herself in her dreams, true love, respect and loyalty reigned, and it was a really happy and safe place for her.

One day, while flipping through an architectural magazine, her attention is drawn to a competition announcement by a very famous foreign architecture and construction company. It was an architectural project competition for young architects to be held in Switzerland. The competition offered young architects a chance to showcase their talents and gain international recognition. The project owners selected by the judges will be invited to the final stage in Switzerland, where all travel and accommodation expenses will be fully covered and where the main winner will be announced. The winning architect would receive both a cash prize and a job opportunity in the main sponsoring company, and most importantly, the project would be built and realized by the sponsoring company.

Reading the details of the announcement, Almas's heart raced, realizing that this was a chance to break free from the moral shackles of current life and prove her talents as a young architect. She decided to think about the concept of her project. There were so many options that could be designed, such as a restaurant, hotel, cafe, beauty salon, health clinic, etc. But no, none of these ideas fit her soul. She began to think, *what would happen if she was given a chance to leave her current life and start another life?* In which type of place, she could live in peace and safety? Then her conscience stung, no matter how much she grew up in lovelessness, mental and physical violence, at least both of her parents were with her and raised her. ***But what about the kids who don't have it at all? All over the world, children deprived of parental care until adulthood usually live in institutions controlled by the state. Well, what about later? What is the fate of those children who are "thrown on the street" after the age of adulthood? Who gives them the chance to start adult life? Every young person who steps into adulthood needs care, support and attention from family, friends and acquaintances. But what about those kids? Who guides those children, who are no longer officially considered children on paper, to start an adult life? Who is trying***

to heal the psychological traumas of those children, many of whom have never been touched by real love, who do not know what love is, and who carry invisible wounds in their souls since childhood? Who checks their physical health before starting to work? Almas dreamed of a scale. In one eye of the scales, she placed a young person who was raised and cared for by his or her family until adulthood, and in the other eye, a young person who either never had them or lost them suddenly after having them and had to live with the pain of it. *In the societies that follow the modern world law, both young people are considered equal in their eyes. But how can they be equal? With what honesty, what justice? In many countries of the world, the physical and, more importantly, the mental health of children who grew up without parental care is ignored, they are treated like a racing animal, they are told "since you have grown up, now go, get a job, start working and fend for yourself". . .*

After all these thoughts, she decided firmly. Since the winning project had a chance to become a reality, it needed to be more than just a place where some rich shepherds come and have fun with their branded wallets. A space that really needs to be built, and the idea is generally worth fighting for. She decided to design a shelter where these youth could live for up to 2 years after reaching adulthood. ***She decided to design a shelter where youth could live for up to 2 years after reaching adulthood. A shelter home where psychological and physical health is treated for these young people who do not know where to go and what to do at the turning points of their lives, who have lived the bottom of injustice from the very beginning of their lives until they enter adult life, where all their material and spiritual needs are met, their interests and talents are revealed, to start adult life by freely deciding whether they want to study or acquire a profession, supporting them in building their future lives There will be a place where they will be made READY.***

To be able to design such a house, Almas put all her passion and soul into this work and worked with all her might and submitted the project to the competition on time. This design idea of hers reflected

the deepest traumas - running away for those like her who lacked love.

A few weeks later, an envelope arrived in the mail. With shaking hands, Almas opened the envelope to find a confirmation letter that she had advanced to the finals of the competition, along with round-trip plane tickets to Switzerland and a hotel voucher. She froze for a moment, stunned, trying to realize that her dream had come true. As soon as the excitement passed, she quickly started preparing for the road.

When it was finally time to go, Almas was in an excited mood. She had never been on a plane before. Going on a trip abroad by plane to Switzerland and staying in a hotel where she would be hosted were luxury expenses that she could not even imagine. Now she was standing at the airport keeping in hand her boarding pass, afraid of losing it. When she tried to put the ticket in bag so as not to lose it, the ticket fell on the ground instead of in the pocket of the bag, and Almas did not see it. She passed the security check of the airport and stood in line for check-in. When it was her turn, she put her hand in the bag and searched for it, but she couldn't find the ticket. To an airline employee in fear:

- I'm sorry, I seem to have lost my ticket, - she continued with teary eyes, - now I won't be able to get on the plane? - the feeling of fear and sadness in her eyes could not be described by words.

- Don't worry, miss. Since your ticket is registered in our system, even if you lose your ticket printed on paper, we will be able to issue you a boarding pass after checking it with your passport, no problem, said the young lady of the airport, smiling and trying to calm Almas.

- Really? Thank you very much. You know, I have never boarded a plane before, this will probably be my first and last trip in my life, he-he-he, if I couldn't go, I would be very sorry, she said, putting her hand on forehead and trying not to show her shame.

After handing in her luggage and getting her boarding pass, she went to the passport control station. She was asked to throw away the water bottle in her bag while passing through the passport control station.

- Liquids are not allowed on the plane, miss, please put the water bottle in the box here.

- Really? I'm sorry, I'm boarding a plane for the first time in my life, I didn't know there was such a rule, I'm very sorry, she apologized as a child if she had done something very wrong.

Seeing that the girl in front of him was upset, the air security officer tried to calm her down:

- There are cafes and vending machines inside, where you can buy soft drinks if you want.

- Hmm... Yes... I understand, yes, thank you very much, I will probably do that.

As soon as Almas crossed the border, she hugged her bag and walked calmly to the shops. She had never been to a store that sold branded goods before. There was still 1 hour until the flight time. She walked towards the entrance of one of the shops, thinking that the time would pass faster if she spent the time until her flight time browsing the shops here and she was also interested in how the products were sold inside. When she was about to enter one of those shops when a salesgirl met her at the door.

- Good afternoon, miss, what kind of product are you interested in?
- asked Almas, glancing up and down.

- I... I... , - teasingly looking at the bags inside, - I would like to look at the bags, he said and tried to step inside, but the seller stopped him:

- Sorry, we don't have any salesmen available to help you now, - said the saleswoman, pushed Almas back slightly. However, it was the job of this "lady" to serve the incoming customers, but, of course, not to poor people like Almas, but to customers who had money to buy the bag inside, even though she was the last person in the world. This "lady" who was even willing to kiss the bottom of the customer's feet in order to get a few dollars as a gift, did not even consider Almas worthy of even looking at the store, so Almas backed away, apologized for taking up the saleswoman's time, bowed her head and went to the boarding gate. Fortunately, she brought her best friend, her favorite book, the novel "Les Misérables" by Victor Hugo. To be honest, she was no different from the "Cosette" of modern times. Suddenly she turned her attention to the large panoramic windows.

The giant blue plane greeted her as if it were a friend. Almas did not know how to react to her joy. Independently said to herself loudly:

- Ah... Look at the plane... The real plane... I will be able to get on it too, - she voiced her thoughts. After the strange looks of the people around her, she lowered her head again and quietly sat down on one of the empty seats. Hugging her bag tightly, she stared motionless at the plane with closed eyes, like a child who had been slapped by parents for being naughty. After all, this state of mind was familiar to her from childhood.....

It was time for the flight, Almas scanned the QR code on the ticket and walked towards the entrance of the plane. Words cannot describe the joy she felt when she looked down the corridor at the airfield. Oh God, she could get on the plane after all. At the entrance, the flight attendant greeted her and took her through the business class with wide and large seats and escorted her to seat in the economy class. The seats, the compartments, the roar of the engines - these were all new and exciting things for Almas. Almas's excitement peaked as the plane began to speed down the runway. As the plane took off, she pressed her face against the window, wide-eyed in astonishment like a little girl. Soon the plane left the ground and began to soar in the sky like a bird. The feeling of flight, the gentle turbulence, the distant horizon - it was unlike anything she had ever experienced. As they climbed higher, the plane began to float through the clouds. The plane began to glide through the clouds as the Almas giant climbed high. Almas gasped when she saw the white masses floating like giant cotton balls up close. The sunlight cast a golden glow on the clouds, making them even more beautiful. Almas felt like a small child again, her heart was filled with pure joy.

Along with all these positive feelings, some negative details did not escape her eyes. Almas, who has made it a habit to observe people's actions since childhood, sometimes paid attention to the smallest details around her, even if she didn't want to. For example, the way in which the people in the economy class looked with envy at the people sitting in the business class made her feel ashamed. She was not against wealth, but she could never tolerate the rich oppressing the poor with their material power. A strong sense of injustice rose in her heart as she observed the scornful and condescending looks

of people in business class passing by and entering the economy zone.

"How it feels to be rich? What if I will be rich enough to help all the needy people I know throughout my life?", she began to think. Her brain, which could no longer bear the excitement and sleeplessness, fell asleep in the melancholy swaying of the plane.

Hours later, the plane began to land in Switzerland. When Almas opened her eyes, she saw that the dense clouds in the landscape below were replaced by gentle hills and a rural landscape.

"Welcome to Zurich airport", her heart was filled with a wave of excitement when she heard the sentence and realized that she was going to set foot in Switzerland for the first time in her life. Almas excitedly went through the passport control and went to the arrival exit. When she saw someone holding a sign with the words "Almas Nielk" in his hand, she realized that this person was the driver sent to meet her as mentioned in the letter. This young driver, blond, fair-skinned, red-cheeked, and green-eyed, about thirty years old, greeted Almas with a sincere smile on his face and approached her to take his luggage. Introducing himself kindly, he took Almas's luggage and escorted her to the black Audi Q7 waiting at the exit.

Almas's eyes widened in amazement as she looked at the streets of Zurich. How exciting it was to see historic buildings standing proudly next to modern architecture. The felts were immaculately clean, surrounded by trees and elegant cafes and boutiques. The trams ran smoothly on their tracks, and the cyclists around them passed comfortably. The driver shared some information with Almas, showing the famous places of the city while crossing the roads. Almas saw the sparkling surface of Lake Zurich, its clear waters reflecting the surrounding mountains and cityscape. One of the most exclusive shopping avenues in the world, the lively Bahnhofstrasse was packed with stylishly dressed people. Architectural monuments such as the Gothic and Romanesque buildings, the famous Fraumunster Church with its amazing stained-glass windows captured her imagination and led her to travel to the rich historical past of the city. Each new sight revealed another perfect scene. Almas seemed to be lost in surrealist dreams, thinking about one of the many stories she had read in books. The beauty and neatness of Zurich contrasted sharply with the rough,

tough charm of Budva. Her heart was filled with a mixture of joy and hope, and with widened eyes, like a small child, she trying to remember every detail she saw.

The driver looked at Almas from the rearview mirror and smiled:

- What do you think about Zurich so far? - he asked in a friendly and sincere tone of voice. - Many say that this is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe, comparable to Paris and Vienna. How do you feel as an architect?

Almas blushed slightly, her cheeks turning bright red.

- I'm not sure, - she admitted with a shy smile, - I'm traveling to Switzerland for the first time.

Their eyes met in the mirror and Almas quickly bowed her head in shame and excitement. The driver continued with a sincere laugh.

- Well, I hope Zurich leaves a good impression on you. *This is a city full of miracles.*

This sentence was involuntarily engraved in Almas's memory at that moment. Indeed, what they experienced was nothing but a miracle for her.

The car finally pulled up to the Mandarin Oriental Savoy, a luxury hotel on a quiet street. The driver removed the bag from the trunk of the car and opened the door for Almas to get out of the car.

Entering the hotel, Almas was immediately impressed by the rich and welcoming atmosphere. The lobby was decorated with elegant chandeliers, their light illuminating the polished marble floors. Tastefully decorated floral decorations gave the surroundings a romantic atmosphere. A polished reception desk made of rich, dark wood material was greeted with a smile by impeccably dressed staff. The sound of guests chatting around echoed in the background with a gentle hum. Almas presented her passport and waited for the registration to be completed. The staff completed the check-in, shared general information about the hotel and presented her with a room key card.

Taking the key, Almas slowly walked towards the elevator with a mixed feeling of excitement and disbelief. The design of the floor where she stayed was spacious and bright. When she got to room,

she took a moment to compose herself before entering. Opening the door, she took the first step into a room with large windows that reflected a stunning view of the city. The room had a luxurious and comfortable atmosphere. Interiors designed in soft, calm tones, high-end furniture and carefully thought-out decorations immediately attracted the attention of Almas as an architect. She put down the luggage and walked to the window, looking down at the twinkling lights of Zurich. For the first time in Almas yard, she felt the feeling of having unlimited possibilities, the presence of a door of miracles that began to open. It was late; after taking a hot shower, she fell asleep like a baby in a cotton-soft bed.



The Tale of the Lost Star

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there was a tiny village nestled in the embrace of towering mountains and lush forests. The village was known for its clear, starry nights, where the sky seemed to come alive with a million shimmering lights. But the most beautiful star of all was a bright, radiant one that hung low in the sky, casting a gentle, silver glow over the village.

This star was known as the Guiding Star, and it was said to bring luck and happiness to all who lived under its light. The villagers cherished it and often told stories about its magic. One such story was about a young girl named Elara, who was kind-hearted and brave. Elara lived with her father, a humble woodcutter, on the edge of the village. Though they were poor, their lives were filled with love and laughter. Every night, Elara

would look up at the Guiding Star and make a wish, dreaming of a brighter future for her and her father.

One night, as Elara was gazing at the sky, a dark cloud passed over the Guiding Star, and it vanished. The village was plunged into darkness, and the hearts of the villagers filled with fear and sorrow. Without the Guiding Star, they believed they would lose their luck and happiness. Determined to find the lost star and restore hope to her village, Elara decided to embark on a journey. With her father's blessing and a small bundle of provisions, she set off into the vast, unknown world beyond the mountains.

Elara's journey was filled with challenges and trials. She crossed treacherous rivers, climbed steep cliffs, and braved dark, enchanted forests. Along the way, she encountered various creatures—some kind, others not. She helped those in need and faced dangers with courage and kindness, earning the trust and friendship of many. In one enchanted forest, Elara met a wise old

owl who told her that the Guiding Star had fallen into the clutches of a powerful sorcerer who lived in a distant, shadowy realm. The sorcerer had hidden the star in a crystal cage atop a towering fortress, surrounded by a maze of illusions and traps. Undeterred, Elara pressed on, guided by the knowledge and advice of her new friends. She finally reached the sorcerer's fortress and, using her wit and bravery, navigated the treacherous maze. When she reached the top of the fortress, she saw the Guiding Star, dim and imprisoned in the crystal cage.

The sorcerer, impressed by Elara's determination, appeared before her. He was a tall, imposing figure with a cloak of shadows and eyes like burning coals. He challenged Elara, asking why she had come so far for a mere star.

Elara stood her ground and spoke from her heart.

- This star is not just a light in the sky. It is a symbol of hope and happiness for my village. Without it, our

lives are filled with darkness and despair. I cannot let that happen.

The sorcerer, moved by her sincerity and bravery, decided to test her resolve. He set her three impossible tasks, each more difficult than the last. But with her kindness, intelligence, and the help of her friends, Elara completed all the tasks. In the end, the sorcerer, touched by Elara's pure heart, released the Guiding Star. He revealed that he had once been a kind man who had lost his way, and Elara's courage had reminded him of the goodness in the world. The star, now free, regained its brilliance and floated back to the sky, shining even brighter than before.

Elara returned to her village, the Guiding Star lighting her way. The villagers rejoiced at her return and the star's restoration. They celebrated Elara's bravery and kindness, and the village once again flourished under the Guiding Star's light. Elara's tale became a legend, passed down through generations,

*a reminder that even in the darkest times, a kind heart
and a brave spirit can restore hope and light to the world.*

Chapter 2

“The Day That Changes Destiny”

Almas opened her eyes to the first light of the morning in her luxurious room at the Mandarin Oriental Savoy. Sunlight filtered through the sheer curtains. Almas felt like a princess in this bed. She had never had a room like this of her own, and even for a little while, she dreamed that this was not a hotel room, but her own home, own room.

“How it feels to wake up in front of this view every morning?” - she asked herself. Before breakfast, she turned on the coffee machine in the room and made a cup of coffee that smelled delicious. Almas had 5 favorite things in this world that made her happy: books, coffee, music, movies and of course her cat Smurf :)

It was still very early in the morning. She could only stay in this hotel for 2 nights, so she wanted to use the time effectively. Starting to listen to a piece of classical music by Chopin on phone, she closed eyes and inhaled deeply the aroma of coffee. A feeling of loneliness came over her. Her heart was like a puzzle with the last piece missing. No matter what she tried to do, no matter where she went, there was a void inside her that could not be filled in any way. Like a little kitten curled up in the chair by the window, with her head on arms and looking at the distant landscape, Almas thought, *“what if this feeling of emptiness inside me will ever go away?”* It never crossed her mind that today was the day that would change the course of her life.

At this moment, Almas, whose eyes were teasing the clock, remembered that it was almost time for the event. She went to the bathroom to take a quick shower. After a quick shower, she put on the simple black dress prepared for today's event. **Black color was Almas's favorite color, she always felt very peaceful in this color. This color, which was negative for many, gave her peace and comfort.** That is why she wanted to look confident and neat by choosing this color on one of the most important days of her life. She packed her things and went to the hotel restaurant for breakfast.

The restaurant featured a space with high ceilings, ornate chandeliers, and large windows that let in plenty of natural light. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee and freshly baked pastries mingled with the soft hum of other guests' conversations. Almas was sitting by the window enjoying the view of the hotel's manicured garden.

At this point, Almas encountered an unpleasant scene. One of the customers yells at a cleaning lady, using incredibly rude and hurtful words. It was known that the old woman was afraid of this vile customer from all her actions. Every time this scoundrel screamed like a wild man, the old woman's eyes filled with tears, her eyelids often opened and closed, she clenched her hands, and her whole body trembled with fear. Terrible creature! Almas couldn't think of any other words in her mind to describe this cruel creature in human skin who was trying to satisfy his ego by making a woman his mother's age a disgrace to everyone for a small mistake. The manager of the restaurant came in a hurry, pushed the cleaner away from there and apologized to the customer again and again. In a world where everything is about money, among those who think "The customer is always right", nobody cared about the humiliation and heartbreak of a person who was just doing his job and trying to earn money. The main thing is that the cherry on the cake of this monstrous creature is not crooked. The eyes of the old woman, who walked away in tears, met Almas's eyes for a moment. She immediately lowered her gaze so as not to embarrass the woman further. At that moment, the anger and sadness she felt in heart knew no bounds. "I wish I could do something for this woman," she wished with all his heart.

A friendly waiter approached her table with a smile.

- Good morning, Miss Nielk. What would you like to choose for breakfast today? - he asked and presented the menu to her.

Almas was indecisive with so many options. Finally, she decided to order fresh fruit, a croissant and a cup of cappuccino. While waiting for order to arrive, she took a deep breath to forget the negative scene she had just seen and focus on today's event. However, there was nothing she could do now. The people around were very rich people with a much stronger social position than her. If life had not given her such a pleasant surprise, she might never have had

breakfast at such a restaurant. The breakfast was quickly brought to table, beautifully arranged on elegant plates. The vibrant colors of the fruit and the golden color of the croissant looked too perfect to eat. She ate slowly and tried to enjoy every bite.

As she sipped coffee, Almas saw four young stylishly dressed ladies of her age sitting on the side table and holding the competition ballot. She turned her face to them and said with a sincere smile:

- It seems that you also came for today's competition. I wish you all good luck.

The other participants looked at her mockingly. One of them answered Almas:

- Yes, success is necessary today. But only for losers like you, ha-ha-ha, - she started laughing very obnoxiously.

The others joined in the laughter. Not understanding what happened, Almas took a glass of water from the corner and stood up. She replayed in mind the words she had said, and the attitude faced and began to wonder if she had done an impolite act without knowing it. She went to the very corner of the restaurant and quietly started sipping water. It was a habit Almas did to calm herself down whenever she was sad.

As the time for the final event approached, Almas made way to the event hall. The event was organized in one of the halls of this hotel. She found the hall, sat down on the seat assigned to her and began to look around anxiously. Looking around at the other participants, Almas realized that she had no chance to win this competition and lowered head. Most of the other participants in the competition were selected students from the world's most prestigious universities. When Almas compared herself to them, a feeling of sadness and emptiness filled her heart.

Almas was always emotionally lonely since childhood. And this made her make every effort to establish some form of contact with her parents, to be liked and appreciated by them. This feeling of loneliness was the reason why Almas strives to put the needs of others before his own, hoping to be accepted in all the relationships she forms. Realizing how difficult it is to receive support and love from others, Almas eventually led those around her to believe that

her emotional needs were minimal. If Almas's inner world had to be described, it would be seen to consist of a helpless child who had never been truly loved since birth, crushed and abused, and an adult warrior woman spirit who would never let anyone hurt that child again. Unable to receive enough parental support and love, Almas eagerly tried to leave childhood behind. She had convinced herself that the best way to deal with the problems and traumas she couldn't overcome was to grow up and be strong. Almas became a capable and hard-working adult at a very young age, but this success also brought her deep loneliness. Ever since she came to know herself, Almas has been involved in various activities to precociously enter adulthood, to feel like a grown-up, and to find her true place in life. Her mind convinced Almas that if she could fully take care of herself materially and morally, she would be considered an adult and would be able to enjoy the benefits of adulthood. She saw adulthood as a means of gaining freedom, acceptance and belonging. Nevertheless, in her haste to escape from childhood, Almas found that as an adult, it did not give her the sense of "wholeness" she thought it would. As a result, she was forced to experience emotional loneliness in all of relationships, largely due to the emotional environment in which she was born and raised.

Suddenly, a stylishly dressed woman in her 40s and 50s stepped onto the stage and took the microphone:

- Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to our event today! Today we have gathered to appreciate the creativity and ideas of talented young architects. Before announcing the winner of the competition, we invite you to watch the exhibition of the projects of the participants while listening to the delicious food and musical performances.

Listening to the woman's welcome speech, Almas felt lonely and thought that no one had seen her, but this was not so. When Ms. Fariza, dressed in black and elegantly dressed in power and strength in her eyes, stopped at a point where no one saw her and looked at all the participants one by one, her eyes were involuntarily focused on Almas. Ms. Fariza was the owner of the holding company, the main sponsor and founder of this competition, and at the same time one of the most famous architects in the world. This lady, who owns a chain of holdings in the building and construction sector, was one of the richest magnates in Switzerland, even the first one. She

paid attention to Almas from the first minute she entered the hall and felt something strange in this young girl whom she saw for the first time that attracted Mrs. Fariza. She couldn't take her eyes off this girl and felt as if she had known this girl for a long time.

After the welcome speech by the lady who inaugurated the event, there were some live classical music performances that added elegance to the atmosphere. The general mood of the people in the hall was filled with anticipation and excitement. When the guests got acquainted with the exhibition, the jury, which consisted of the most selected architects of Switzerland, went to the meeting room and started discussions to determine the winner. The discussion, which started at a calm pace, became more and more heated. Mrs. Fariza sat at the head of the meeting table and watched the discussion of those around her in a calm and reserved manner as usual. As an experienced architect of many years, Mrs. Fariza would always try to add a purpose, or, as she says, "soul" to a design she made. Most of this year's contestants entered the competition only for money, career and fame, most of them didn't care about the art and creative side of the job, all they thought about was how to design a trendy restaurant, beauty salon, villa or resort that would attract monetary powerful customers. Among all these participants, only Almas worked on project with all sincerity, adding a piece of her soul to this work. She designed a 5-floor shelter for children who were just entering adulthood without parental care.

Most of the jury members were *"elite members of society who have everything in life but not humanity"* - of the same character as most of the contestants, who decided to judge this competition because it was "fashionable" rather than helping young architects. Although the choice of the winner was determined by a general decision, the last decision was always made by Mrs. Fariza. Each of the judges flattered her and tried to "impose" their favorite projects on her. When the discussion heated up and the two members of the jury started arguing with each other, Ms. Fariza put her hand under her chin and watched the *"cheap actions of elite class members"* with disgust. While the jurors were debating, Mrs. Fariza suddenly stood up and approached the wall where a copy of the works was displayed. She examined each of the framed works hanging on the wall one by one. As an additional task, each of the participants was asked to express the purpose of their project in a single sentence. Only Mrs.

Fariza knew that this very condition of the competition would play a decisive role in the selection of the winner. In this way, she could better understand the purpose of the designed project. It was clear that each of the projects was designed with high education and professionalism of elite students who graduated from the most selected universities in the world.

However, what Ms. Fariza wanted was more related to artistry than professionalism. Nowadays, young architects see the person they are addressing as just a client, and the design itself as just a source of money. An architect who is devoted to her work, trying to get to know the persons she addresses, to understand their life and character, could be a real artist in the eyes of Mrs. Fariza.

Although all the works that she had studied since long ago were in accordance with the architectural rules and aesthetically beautiful, for Mrs. Fariza, the goals of creating these works seemed empty and pointless. After each work she reviewed and finished, her eyes reflected regret and mild anger. When it was Almas's turn, the sentence about the purpose of the design hit Mrs. Fariza like an arrow in the middle of her heart:

"Every child on earth deserves to live happily and peacefully, even those who does not have their own families."

She picked up the frame with Almas's design, returned to the oval table where the other judges were still discussing the winner, and slammed the frame in her hand on the table.

- I made my decision about who will be the winner. This year's winner will be Almas Nielk.

Everyone froze in place, shocked by her action. For many years, Ms. Fariza participated in this competition just symbolically, just to support future architects, she shared the same opinion with everyone about the choice of the winner and went back without waiting for the end of her event without even showing herself to the participants. Now, all the judges were shocked that she chose the winner directly herself, in such a strict way. After a few seconds of silence, a red-haired woman from the jury finally said with a half-nervous giggle:

- Are you serious? Shelter design for orphans? What an unnecessary and time-consuming project this is! ORPHANS ARE THE GARBAGES OF THE SOCIETY! Imagine a group of abandoned children, many of whom are not loved even by their own parents. NO ONE CARES ABOUT ORPHANS IN THIS WORLD! THEY ARE NOTHING MORE THAN A DEFECTIVE PRODUCTS THAT NO ONE NEEDS!

Hearing these words, Mrs. Fariza raised her head and looked straight into the eyes of that woman, the feeling of anger in her eyes flashed like a bullet in the face of both that woman and the other judges. They began to tremble with fear only now remembering who was in front of them. The woman who answered her choice with a laugh a little while ago, lowered her head in fear and said:

- I apologize, Mrs. Fariza. If you think this design deserves to win, your request is an order for us. We will immediately make all preparations for awarding Almas Nielk as the winner.

- Great...

Mrs. Fariza got up and left the meeting room.

Almas never imagined that she would win this competition. As the winner was being announced, her eyes teased the four contestants who mocked her at breakfast. She immediately lowered head and began to stare at one point with deep sadness and disappointment like a baby.

The presentation of the award to Almas was entrusted to the red-haired judge, who had just laughed, by order of Mrs. Fariza. The woman stepped forward and said:

- Dear guests, the jury has decided. The winner of this year's contest is... Almas Nielk.

Almas could not believe her ears at first. She thought her mind was playing tricks on her. The woman on stage again:

- Almas Nielk, we invite you to the stage for the award presentation.

Suddenly, thunderous applause began to sound around. Almas instantly realized the truth and realized that she had won. She stood up, walked calmly towards the stage. Although her whole body was trembling with excitement, it was as if an invisible hand supported

her and led her forward. She went on the stage and shook the hands of the judges, although the red-haired woman who presented the award was almost bursting with hiccups, she shook Almas's hand and presented the award with a fake smile on her face because she knew that Mrs. Fariza was watching them now. This quiet girl, who had not attracted anyone's attention for a long time, suddenly became the center of everyone's attention. After Almas left the stage, the presenter:

- Dear guests, the final ceremony is hereby declared closed. We invite you all to go to hall number 2 for the party.

Almas went out into the common lobby and tried to calm herself. At that moment, her eyes caught sight of her reflection in the huge mirror hanging in the hallway. Almas Nielk, the girl in the mirror from a small country, has grown up today and won one of the most prestigious awards in the world. Her forehead was sweaty, she put her hand in pocket and took out a gray silk handkerchief and wiped forehead with it. This handkerchief was a souvenir from her grandmother. After wiping sweat, she hurriedly went to the other hall, trying to put the handkerchief in her pocket. As she was in a hurry, she did not see the handkerchief fall to the floor. At that moment, a hand carrying an expensive diamond ring picked up the handkerchief. Almas's throats dry from excitement, she approached the bar and ordered orange juice. Since the glass was very cold, she wanted to hold it with a handkerchief so that she could hold it in hand for a long time. When she put her hand in pocket, she did not find the handkerchief, and she panicked. This handkerchief was very dear to her. At that moment, a stern but friendly voice said from behind:

- It seems that you are looking for this, young lady?

When Almas turned and looked at the face of the person who called to her, she froze in place, her eyes widened in surprise. This person was the most unlikely person Almas could connect with today.



The Tale of the Silent Weaver

Once upon a time, in a bustling kingdom filled with merchants, nobles, and artisans, there lived a quiet girl named Mira. Mira worked in the shadowy corner of a grand marketplace, weaving intricate tapestries. She wasn't like the other artisans, who loudly boasted about their work and displayed their creations in dazzling stalls. Mira's booth was small and tucked away, her tapestries modestly hung for passersby to see. Despite her skill, few noticed her work, and even fewer stopped to appreciate it. Mira wove with her heart, creating stories in her tapestries that reflected her dreams and the lives of those often overlooked: the struggling farmers, the alone children, the kind strangers who gave without expecting anything in return. Her tapestries were delicate and beautiful, yet they told stories of pain and hope. However, in a marketplace that celebrated wealth and power, such stories seemed unimportant.

Mira often felt invisible, wondering if her efforts mattered at all.

One day, an announcement rang through the kingdom: the Queen had declared a great contest. The most beautiful and meaningful piece of art would be chosen to hang in the royal hall, where visitors from all lands would admire it. Artisans from every corner of the kingdom rushed to participate, bringing their finest works to the grand palace. Mira hesitated. She had always woven in silence, never seeking the attention of others. Why would the Queen care about my stories? she thought. Yet, something inside her stirred—a small voice that urged her to try. That night, Mira worked tirelessly on a new tapestry, pouring her soul into every thread. She wove the story of the kingdom itself, not through the eyes of its rulers, but through the struggles and triumphs of its ordinary people. At the center of the tapestry, she wove a single golden thread, symbolizing hope that connected them all.

When the day of the contest arrived, Mira carried her tapestry to the palace. She felt small and out of place among the other contestants, whose works glittered with gold and jewels, radiating luxury. Their paintings and sculptures depicted grand battles, mighty kings, and sprawling palaces. Mira's tapestry, with its muted colors and quiet story, seemed insignificant in comparison. The other contestants sneered at her work, whispering that it was unworthy of the Queen's attention.

As the contest began, the Queen entered the hall, her presence commanding and serene. She walked slowly, examining each piece of art with a critical eye. The artists stood proudly beside their creations, eagerly explaining their brilliance. The Queen nodded politely but showed little emotion as she moved from one masterpiece to the next. When she reached Mira's tapestry, she stopped. For a long moment, she said nothing, her eyes tracing the delicate patterns and the golden thread that wove through it. Mira stood silently,

unsure of what to say. Finally, the Queen spoke, her voice soft but firm:

- Who made this? - she asked, turning to her attendants.

- I did, Your Majesty, - Mira said, her voice trembling.

The Queen studied her closely.

- This tapestry is different from the others, she said, it tells the story of those who are rarely seen, those who build this kingdom with their quiet strength. It is not grand or showy, but it holds a truth that none of the others do.

The room fell silent. The other contestants shifted uncomfortably, their confidence waning. The Queen turned to her court.

- This, she declared, is the piece that shall hang in the royal hall. For it reminds us that a kingdom is not only

built by kings and warriors, but by the unseen hands of its people.

Mira's heart raced as the hall erupted in applause. For the first time, she felt truly seen—not just for her skill, but for the quiet, compassionate spirit that had always guided her work.

The Queen placed a hand on her shoulder and said:

- Your art carries a light that this kingdom needs. Never doubt its worth.

From that day on, Mira's tapestries became treasured throughout the land, not for their extravagance, but for the stories they told. She continued to weave in her quiet corner, but now, her work reached hearts far beyond the marketplace. And though Mira remained humble, she understood that even the smallest, most silent voices could change the world when they spoke from the heart.

Chapter 3

“The Meeting of Two Souls”

- It seems that you are looking for this, young lady? - someone called out to Almas from behind in a strong but gentle voice.

Hearing the voice, Almas' eyes widened in surprise when she saw who was calling her. Almas, who could not believe her eyes, was surprised:

- You?! Mrs. Fariza?

- What? Don't you want to take your handkerchief? - Mrs. Fariza said with a half-serious, half-friendly smile on her face, raising one eyebrow.

She looked at the handkerchief in Mrs. Fariza's hand and saw that it was her own handkerchief. Oh my God, Fariza Rahimi, the owner of the Keystone Global Holdings chain, one of the most prestigious brands in the world's architecture and construction sector, had bent down and picked up her handkerchief from the floor. Almas, whose cheeks were red with embarrassment, immediately took the handkerchief from Mrs. Fariza's hand, who had handed it to her, and said:

- Thank you very much, Madam.

Almas had seen Mrs. Fariza's pictures in an architectural magazine. The portrait of this old woman on a black and white background had created a feeling of admiration and respect in Almas' heart. Now she saw that powerful image vividly. It was a well-known fact that Mrs. Fariza did not like to communicate with people she did not know. While many respectful people in society refused to meet her, Mrs. Fariza, who had people in front of her shy and trembling at her officer, spoke to an ordinary young architect like Almas, which was something that had never been seen before. Almas's mind could not accept this truth.

Mrs. Fariza, who had been watching Almas with involuntary attention for a while, had seen Almas's handkerchief to the ground. When she took the soft silk texture in her hand, many pleasant memories from the past came to her mind for a moment. Joyful

feelings that she thought she had forgotten. Reliving these memories, even for a few seconds, had created a crack in the iceberg in her heart and awakened dormant emotions. The movements of this young girl standing in front of her now, the light in her eyes - all this reminded her of someone she once loved very much her dear daughter Ela. Seeing how excited Almas was after meeting her, Mrs. Fariza smiled at her with a rare smile and said:

- It seems that you have had a rather exciting day.
- Yes, what I have experienced today has really been a lot for me. I still can't believe that I won the competition, it's as if I'm in a dream,
- Almas admitted to her shyly.

Hearing this confession made by this young girl in front of her with complete childish innocence, far from any kind of cunning, Mrs. Fariza's heart warmed even more towards Almas. To calm her down she said:

- Believe me, you deserve this victory. Your design idea was truly exceptional.

Almas, unaware that Mrs. Fariza had directly decided on her victory, looked down and said:

- I don't understand, how did the judges consider my project worthy of victory, leaving aside other great projects? *Who would choose me?*

Mrs. Fariza raised one eyebrow to play a light game with Almas, who was unaware that the winner was chosen by her decision, and said:

- *Who knows, maybe your design idea was very important to someone*, - she said with a light sarcastic look in her eyes and warm smiling.

Almas smiled shyly:

- Thank you very much, Mrs, Fariza, it means the world to me to hear these words from an architect like you, - she said.

Mrs. Fariza, wanted to talk to Almas alone, away from everyone's eyes, pointed to the hotel veranda and said:

- Would you like to go out into the open air for a while and talk? I have a topic which I would like to discuss with you.

- Me... With me? You?! Of course, - Almas replied, her tongue stuck out in surprise. What could a woman like Mrs. Fariza discuss with an ordinary girl like her?

Together they went out onto the hotel veranda and began to admire the view. Mrs. Fariza began to speak:

- Almas, I see a special quality in you. Your enthusiasm, dedication, and perspective on the world remind me of someone I know very well. I can almost say that I have never felt anything like this towards anyone other than that person.

Almas listened to Mrs. Fariza's words like a student listening to his teacher with a deep sense of pride and responsibility.

- I have a proposition for you, - she continued, - You do not have to answer right away. I know that you have a completely different life in another country. As the winner of this competition, you will receive a cash prize and your project will be realized, but I want to offer you more than that. I have been needing someone to help me redesign my mansion for a long time. But since it is my personal residence, I cannot trust just anyone to come there. As you know, I am a very busy person and do not have time to deal with this work myself. My mansion in Zurich is a family heirloom to me, and I do not want to hand over this precious heirloom to a soulless architect. This house, filled with memories, some beautiful, some painful, needs the touch of someone who understands the depth of feelings and will redesign the space while preserving the memories here. I think you are the perfect candidate for this job.

Almas eyes filled with tears, said:

- It would be an honor for me not only to redesign such a mansion full of spiritual treasures, but also to simply visit it. However, I am not sure that I am the person who can fulfill your request to a worthy level, after all, I am just a newly graduated, inexperienced architect.

Mrs. Fariza smiled again:

- There is no need to rush to decide, I am sure that you will change your mind after seeing the place with your own eyes tomorrow, - she said.

- Tomorrow? After all, I have only come here for two days. I have a return ticket for tomorrow, and my hotel was only booked for two nights.

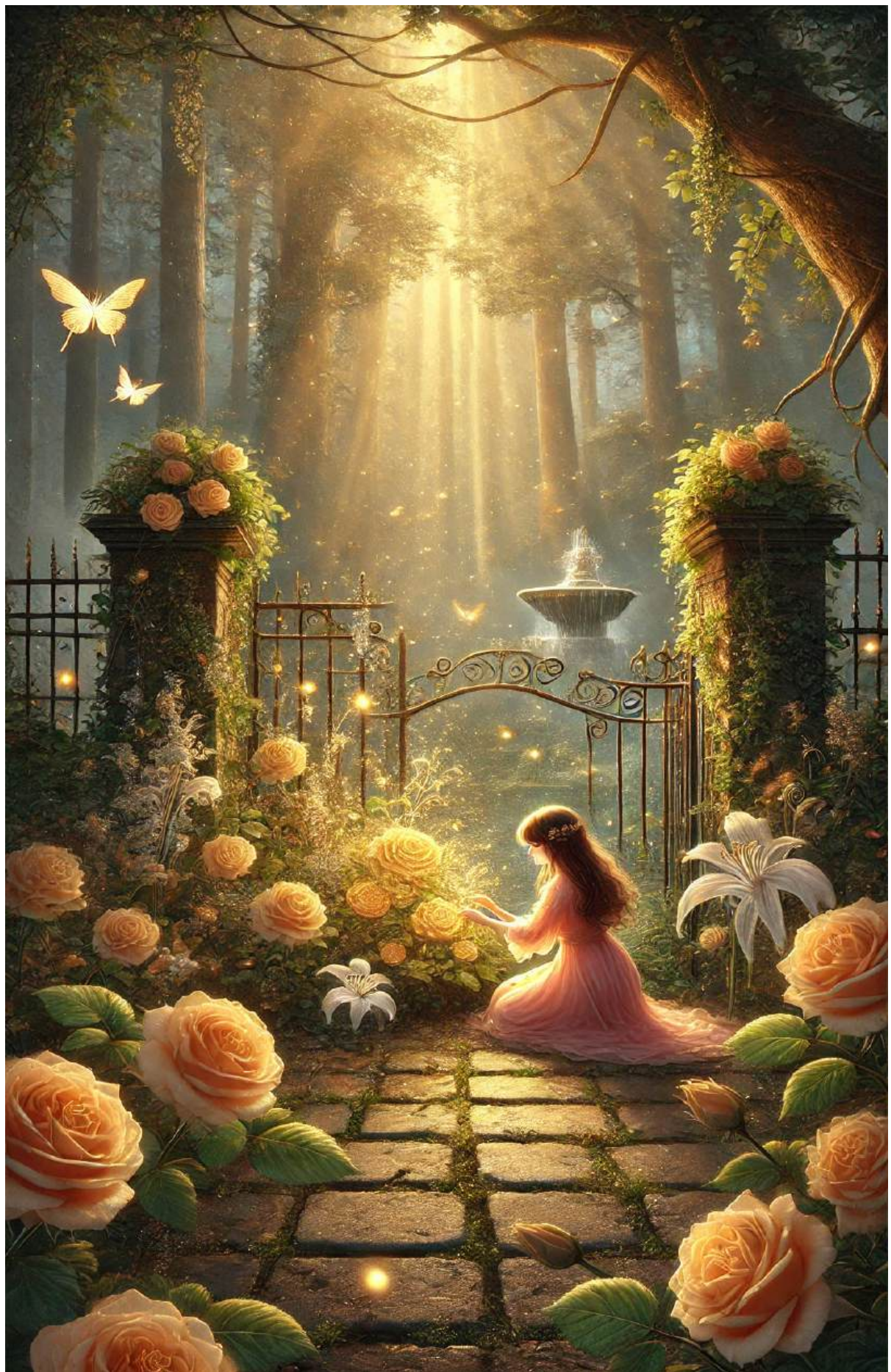
- There is no need to worry about this. Your return ticket will be replaced with a new one, and instead of a hotel, you will stay in the mansion, which will give you the opportunity to get to know the place better.

- I... I... I don't know what to say, Mrs. Fariza, - Almas said, lowering her head shyly.

- Today is your day, enjoy your victory, and tomorrow morning I will wait for you at the mansion.

- Well noted! - Almas replied, not knowing what else to say, - Thank you very much for everything, Mrs. Fariza, you are an amazing person.

Mrs. Fariza, showing one last smile at this compliment which said with purity and shyness, left the veranda through the exit that opened into the hotel garden, without returning to the hall. Almas only now glanced at the Audi Q7 car that had been parked outside. The smiling driver who had been following them just now greeted Almas with a nod. Almas, in turn, nodded and received his greeting shyly, looking down, her cheeks slightly blushing. This was the same driver who had met her at the airport. The driver opened the door for Mrs. Fariza and bowed slightly. After she got into the car and drove away, Almas felt that she could no longer stand. Her legs were shaking, and she could barely sit down on the chair next to her. So many events in one day were too much for a girl like Almas, who had lived a simple life. She had come to Zurich with only the slightest hope of luck, and now she was offered a chance that would change her life. She couldn't wait to see what tomorrow would bring.



The Tale of the Forgotten Garden

Once upon a time, in a distant kingdom, hidden beyond mountains cloaked in mist, there lay a forgotten garden. Long ago, it had been the most beautiful place in the land—filled with golden roses, silver lilies, and fountains that sang songs of joy. Birds with shimmering feathers danced above its branches, and people from across the world visited to see its wonder.

But over time, the garden fell silent. The gardener who once tended it with love had vanished, and the flowers wilted, their petals turning gray. A great iron gate closed around it, and the villagers whispered that the garden could only be brought back to life by someone who could hear its heart.

In a small village at the edge of the kingdom lived a young girl named Lora. She was quiet and humble, a dreamer who spent her days caring for the flowers in her family's tiny yard. Lora saw beauty where others did

not: she sang to the daisies, whispered secrets to the tulips, and listened to the stories carried by the wind.

One day, as Lora sat among the wildflowers, an old woman dressed in black approached her. Her eyes were sharp, like the edge of a blade, yet there was kindness hidden in their depths.

-Child, the woman said, I have been searching for someone like you. Come with me to a place that needs your touch.

-Me? - Lora asked, wide-eyed. But I am no one special.

The woman raised an eyebrow, a half-smile on her lips.

-Sometimes, those who see themselves as small carry the greatest magic of all.

With that, the woman led Lora to the forgotten garden. Its iron gates creaked open, revealing a place cloaked in shadow. The fountains were silent, and the flowers lay still, as if holding their breath.

-Do you hear it? the woman asked.

Lora closed her eyes and listened. At first, there was nothing but silence. But then—faint as a whisper—she heard it: the soft sob of a garden that had forgotten how to bloom.

-I hear it, Lora said softly.

The woman nodded; her expression unreadable.

- Then this garden is yours now. Help it remember what it has forgotten.

Lora began her work. She knelt beside the roots of the roses, whispering words of love. She cupped water in her hands and fed the lilies, telling them stories of sunshine and laughter. She swept the dust from the fountains, singing as she worked. Days turned to nights, and though the garden remained gray, Lora did not lose hope.

One evening, as the moon bathed the garden in silver light, Lora wept softly beneath an old oak tree.

- *Why will you not bloom? she whispered to the earth.
"I have given you everything I have.*

*A breeze stirred, and a voice—soft and low—filled the
air.*

- *Because you are afraid, child. You give, but you do
not believe that you are worthy of the beauty you create.*

*Lora gasped and looked around, but no one was there.
The voice continued:*

*This garden reflects your heart. If you wish for it to
bloom, you must first believe in yourself.*

*Lora's tears fell to the soil, but this time, they were
tears of understanding. She stood, took a deep breath,
and whispered:*

*- I am worthy of love. I am worthy of beauty. I am
enough.*

*At that moment, the garden awoke. The earth trembled
as golden roses unfurled their petals, and silver lilies
swayed in the breeze. The fountains roared to life, their*

waters sparkling like diamonds. Birds returned, filling the air with songs, and light spilled through the clouds, turning the garden into a place of magic once more.

When the old woman returned, she found Lora standing at the heart of the blooming garden, her hands covered in soil and her face glowing with joy.

- You have done it, the woman said, her voice gentle. The garden has returned, and so have you.

Lora looked at her, realization dawning in her eyes.

- You knew all along, didn't you? That the garden was not broken, but waiting—waiting for me to believe in myself.

The woman smiled—a true, warm smile this time—and said,

- Yes, child. The most beautiful places in the world are not built by hands alone, but by hearts that dare to dream.

From that day on, Lora became the garden's keeper. People traveled from far and wide to see the golden roses and hear the songs of the fountains. But more than that, they came to see Lora—the girl who turned a forgotten place into a living miracle with nothing but love and belief.

And in the quiet moments, when the wind carried whispers through the flowers, Lora would smile, knowing that sometimes, the greatest magic begins when we choose to believe in ourselves.

Chapter 4

"The Adventure Begins"

Almas arrived at Mrs. Fariza's mansion early in the morning. Her heart was filled with both excitements. The grandeur of the mansion amazed her as an architect. The mansion was in the middle of gardens that stretched as if to infinity.

This mansion had been built by Mrs. Fariza's father in a mixed of Victorian and Gothic styles. The height and complexity of the roof design gave the mansion a mysterious and powerful appearance. A magnificent wide staircase led to the main entrance, where oak doors decorated with floral motifs greeted visitors. The veranda, supported by exquisitely crafted columns, took the power of the mansion to an even higher level. The beauty of this mansion was hidden not only in itself, but also in the design of the surrounding garden. The garden was a masterpiece, featuring a harmonious blend of manicured lawns, vibrant flowerbeds, and ancient, towering trees. The winding paths that wound through the grounds led to and from a small pond, each designed to provide a moment of peace and harmony.

As soon as Almas got out of the car, she was greeted at the bottom of the stairs by Mrs. Fariza's personal assistant, a man named Darvish, who was waiting to escort her inside. Darvish, who was in his forties, immediately exuded a sense of trust and loyalty. His tall, athletic body, dark hair, impeccably tailored black suit, and eyes like black olive that never missed a beat spoke volumes about his sharp intellect and devotion to Mrs. Fariza. This man, who had been closest to her for many years, had started out as a gardener at the mansion and had become the person Mrs. Fariza trusted the most after herself. Since she did not like to go out in public, Darvish had become an influential figure who handled all official and unofficial affairs on her behalf.

- Welcome, Miss Nielk. Mrs. Fariza is already waiting for you in her office, - Almas was greeted by Darvish with a serious but sincere smile. His tone of voice was calm and reassuring.

Almas, trying to calm her rapidly beating heart, said to Darvish, not wanting to show her excitement:

- Thank you, Mr.... Mr....

- My name is Darvish. I am Mrs. Fariza's personal assistant, - he said, extending his hand towards Almas, bowing respectfully to her.

- It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Darvish, Almas said, extending his hand and shaking Darvish's hand.

Together they entered the mansion and walked through the corridors, each more magnificent than the other. The walls were decorated with antique paintings and sculptures. The furniture was designed in a style that mixed classic elegance and modern comfort. Large windows allowed an abundance of natural light to flood the rooms, further enhancing the elegant beauty of the ornate frames and the curtains that covered them. The intricately designed parquet floor echoed with their footsteps, adding a harmonious rhythm to their steps in the pointed corridors.

Finally, they reached a study that exuded an intellectual heaviness. Darvish, who knocked politely on the door, opened the door after hearing the words "Come" from inside and invited Almas in. He remained outside the room and closed the door gently after Almas entered. The interior of the room was surrounded by tall bookshelves filled with volumes on architecture, history, and art. In the middle was a large oak table filled with architectural plans and sketches, illuminated like a mirror. Behind the table sat Mrs. Fariza, whose appearance exuded nobility and power, with a sharp gaze.

Mrs. Fariza greeted Almas warmly:

- Good morning, Almas. Please sit down.

Without saying anything, Almas sat down in one of the leather chairs opposite Mrs. Fariza. She was both tense and excited. The room was silent, accompanied by the ticking of the large clock in the corner. Mrs. Fariza leaned forward; her eyes were kind but serious. Almas slowly gathered her courage and began to speak:

- Good morning, Mrs. Fariza. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to you for inviting me to your mansion.

- How are you? Have you been able to shake off the excitement of victory since yesterday?

- To be honest, I still don't know how to react. These past 3 days I feel as if I have been living someone else's life, not my own.

- Hmm, maybe *it's time for you to be someone else in life*, Mrs. Fariza said with a half-smile on her face.

- As I said yesterday, I am a simple girl born and raised in a simple family in Montenegro. So much glory and luxury are very foreign to me.

- I understand you. All this seems like a very heavy responsibility to you. But I want you to understand that fate has given you a chance that not everyone has. I really want you to be able to appreciate this chance correctly.

- I am aware of this, but I can't help but think about the questions "What if I can't bear this heavy burden properly? What if I get crushed under it?"

- You have a lot to learn on this path that you are just beginning, of course, but let me teach you one of the most important things. *Words have magic. Whatever you think, whatever you want, it will happen, if you want it with a sincere heart and with faith. No word you say is meaningless, each one rises to the cosmos the moment it leaves your mouth and continues to sound in the void forever.* Many people, because they do not know this, change their futures to the negative without even realizing it.

Almas listened to what Mrs. Fariza said with wide eyes.

- This path you are going to take is difficult and arduous, but if you can go to the end with patience and willpower, you will gain the most valuable thing on this path - "Yourself".

- Myself?! Excuse me, I have difficulty understanding your words.

- This is natural, don't worry. *The self, that is, the spirituality of a person, means the reason for living in this life.* Many people live and die without realizing why they were created in this world. Many do not even live, they simply exist. It is better if they just stay with it. Many forget their humanity, succumb to their own desires, and do not hesitate for a moment to cause material and moral harm to

other people for the sake of worldly desires. My heart was not satisfied with the loss of a young, pure-hearted, but inexperienced girl like you in such a world. After our conversation yesterday, I thought a lot, if you accept my proposal, I will make all the necessary preparations to educate you in all aspects.

At this point in the conversation Mariam entered with coffee cups and cookies in her hands. She was a fair-skinned, emerald-eyed, ginger-haired, noble-looking woman, about 40-50 years old.

- Sorry to bother you, Mrs. Fariza.

- Come, Mariam. We were also talking to Almas, - Mrs. Fariza said to Mariam.

- Mariam is the head assistant of the mansion, and one of my closest people. I have no employees in this house, but relatives, and Mariam is one of them.

Mariam turned to Almas and smiled. Almas felt a strange sincerity towards her from everyone in this house. A sincerity that was not fake, behind which no trick was hidden. She smiled in response to Mariam.

Mrs. Fariza continued:

- Nowhere in the world can you eat dishes as delicious as Mariam's cooking. Especially sweets can lead a person astray, - she said and laughed lightly.

Mariam lowered her head shyly:

- As always, you are praising me for no reason, - she said.

Almas had been watching Mrs. Fariza carefully for a long time. Instead of that scary woman who was considered the "Ice Queen" in magazines and news, it was as if she had a noble empress in front of her. The sincerity shown towards her reduced Almas's tension to the point of disappearing. She took the coffee cup in her hand and inhaled the aroma of coffee, smiling involuntarily.

- It seems that you love coffee as much as I do. Coffee is like gasoline for an architect's brain. We have found another common ground with you, - Mrs. Fariza said with a laugh.

Almas was embarrassed, for a moment she had forgotten that there were others in the room.

- Now let's move on to the formal part of the matter. As I mentioned earlier, I want to raise you as a talented architect and personality. I will hire you as an architect in my company. You will have the chance to train yourself from beginning as an official employee of Keystone Global Holding. I will teach you everything I know about architecture. In your spare time, you will help me redesign the mansion. In short, I am offering you a new life and a path that will lead you to the top, where you will be completely secure financially and spiritually. I have only one question: Do you feel ready to embark on this path?

- Even the thought of what you are offering can make a person fly to the skies. My life has been full of responsibilities and trials since I realized myself. Not because I am afraid of difficulties, but because I am worried about my family. I am the only child in my family. After school, I used to help them in the small hostel that my family runs. My family does not have the means to hire additional workers. I think that my absence will make their business, which is already not going well, even more difficult.

- You absolutely do not need to think about the financial side of things. Whatever is necessary to ensure that your family does not experience any problems in your absence will be done, have no doubt about that. There is one last question I need to clarify before giving you a new life in Switzerland: Is there someone special waiting for you in Montenegro or who is keeping you there?

Almas understood the gist of the question immediately. Normally, she would have been embarrassed to talk about this topic, but this time, in addition to embarrassment, a deep sadness appeared in her eyes.

- No, Mrs. Fariza, there is no such person in my life, to be honest, there never was, - after saying these sentences, Almas's entire life flashed before her eyes. Her peers, the families they were born into and established, their children, and then Almas's own family and the loneliness that followed her throughout her life.

Mrs. Fariza felt as if she had touched a wound that had never healed and made it bleed. She had not guessed that this topic would be so

sensitive for Almas. Almas was a simple, but well-groomed, attractive young girl with a slender figure, long black hair, and large dark brown eyes. Looking at her from the outside, one might think that she was a girl with countless lovers in her life. ***But Almas's truth was different. She had never been truly loved by any man until now. She had never tasted true love, neither in the family she was born into, nor in her personal life. She did not know what it felt like to be loved.*** People are divided into two groups when it comes to love. Those who become cruel from lack of love, whose hearts are filled with hatred, and those who, knowing how hard it is to be without love, create the highest possible level of love within themselves and try to give it to others. ***Almas was a person belonging to the second group.***

Mrs. Fariza called Darvish to distract Almas. When Darvish entered the room, she pointed to Darvish and said to Almas:

- It seems that you have already met, but I would like to introduce Darvish to you personally. Darvish is not only my personal assistant, but also the person I trust the most in this world. I would entrust him with not only my secrets, but even my life without even thinking about it.

Darvish bowed in a peculiar way to Mrs. Fariza at these words. She continued:

- If you have any difficulties with any subject, you can tell Darvish without hesitation. Your comfort and happiness are very important to me, - she said and turned to Darvish:

- Darvish, you will immediately appoint someone to go to Montenegro, to Budva. The person you appoint should leave tomorrow and go to Almas's family. Let him be sure that her family will not have any material or moral needs in the absence of Almas. Do not leave that family for a day until I give you a second order.

Darvish bowed again:

- Well noted! I will immediately give an order to one of my most trusted people based on your order. From now on, all the problems of the Nielk family will be my responsibility. Do not let your eyes remain behind, - he said.

Mrs. Fariza turned to Almas again and said:

- Did you hear, Almas? Even a bird cannot escape from Darvish's hands and save its life. Do not worry about your family in the slightest. I personally promise you that they will never regret letting you live with me. As an aspect of living with me, my main home is in New York, but I have decided to move here with you. Although the mansion has been unused for a long time, I think we will be able to give it a new "breath" very soon. You will also live in this mansion, you will always be in my sight. Before we end our conversation today, there is one last thing I want you to know. You can imagine that I will put you in a golden cage for the rest of your life. Not to "capture", but to protect you. The key of this cage will always be in your own hands. Whenever you want to leave here, the door will always open. I will personally help you overcome all the difficulties you will encounter on your path of development, but for this you must do what I say "do" and try not to do what I say "don't". I will not force you on anything. This mansion will not be your prison, but your palace where you will live with a sense of peace and confidence. **I WILL SHOW YOU HOW TO TRANSFORM YOURSELF INTO A PERSON NOT AS I WANT YOU TO BE, BUT AS YOU WANT TO BE, WITHOUT LOSING THE LOVE AND COMPASSION IN YOUR HEART, IN A POWERFUL AND STRONG WAY.** Welcome to my life, Almas. From this day forward, you are my spiritual daughter.

Almas kissed Mrs. Fariza's hand and said with tears in her eyes:

- Mrs. Fariza, with this initiative, you are taking a young girl from the cruel clutches of life and giving her unprecedented strength. I promise you that I will do everything in my power not to disappoint your hopes in me. I am very happy to know you and to be a part of your world.

Mrs. Fariza lifted her up and hugged her.

- I don't think you have enough wardrobe since you've only been to Switzerland for 2 days. Today I'll go with you to my personal tailor, and then we'll go shopping and make you a new wardrobe. If you're ready, Mariam will take you to the room where you'll be staying. Put your bag in your room and get acquainted with your room, then come downstairs. We'll have a lot to do with you today.

Almas nodded in agreement and followed Mariam up the large and wide stairs that led upstairs. Mariam showed her room. It seemed to Almas like an elegant but soulless room designed in a classical style. As soon as Almas saw the room, she involuntarily imagined how she would redesign the space like an architect. While she was lost in thought, Mariam slowly approached her:

- You'll still have plenty of time to think, Mrs. Fariza is waiting for you downstairs. It wouldn't be good to keep her waiting, - she said in a friendly manner.

- You're right, Ms. Mariam, I forgot everything for a moment when I saw the room, - Almas said apologetically.

- I understand, don't worry. Everything will be fine. You don't realize yet under the protection of what kind of powerful person you are. You will get used to it in time.

Almas reluctantly put down his bag and carefully closed the door of the room behind him. She began to descend the stairs. Her steps were now firmer and fuller of confidence.



The Tale of Butterfly

Once upon a time, in a vibrant and enchanting forest, there lived a tiny caterpillar. It was no ordinary caterpillar; it had a heart full of dreams and an insatiable curiosity about the world beyond the leaves it nibbled on. The forest was its home, a place where every leaf, flower, and tree had a story to tell. Yet, this caterpillar often gazed up at the sky, watching the butterflies flutter gracefully from flower to flower, longing to join them one day. One sunny morning, as it was munching on a particularly delicious leaf, an old and wise butterfly named Elderwing landed beside it. Its wings shimmered with shades of blue and gold, and its eyes sparkled with the wisdom of many seasons.

- Good morning, young one, Elderwing greeted it warmly. I see you often look up at the sky with longing. What is it that you dream of?

Caterpillar looked up; its tiny eyes wide with wonder.
- I dream of flying, Elderwing. I dream of seeing the world from above, feeling the wind beneath my wings, and exploring places beyond this forest.

Elderwing smiled kindly.

- Your dreams are beautiful, little one. And one day, they will come true. But first, you must undergo a great transformation. It will be challenging and perhaps even frightening, but it is the only way to achieve your dreams."

With that, Elderwing fluttered away, leaving the caterpillar with a mixture of excitement and apprehension.

Days turned into weeks, and the caterpillar continued to grow. It knew that the time for its transformation was approaching. One evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a golden glow over the forest, it felt an overwhelming urge to find a safe and quiet place. It crawled to a sturdy branch and began to spin a silky

cocoon around itself. The cocoon enveloped it, providing a safe, dark haven where it could begin transformation. Inside the cocoon, the caterpillar felt itself changing. It was a strange and sometimes uncomfortable process, but it remembered Elderwing's words and kept its dreams close to its heart. Days turned into weeks, and the forest around it continued its vibrant dance of life. One bright morning, it felt a surge of energy within its cocoon. It was time. It wriggled and pushed, slowly breaking free from its silken shell. As it emerged, it felt a rush of exhilaration. Its tiny caterpillar body was gone, replaced by delicate, colorful wings. Butterfly spent some time drying its wings in the warm sunlight, feeling the strength and beauty coursing through them. When it was ready, it took a deep breath and launched itself into the air. The sensation was unlike anything it had ever experienced. The wind caressed its wings, lifting the butterfly higher and higher. From above, the forest looked even more enchanting. The flowers were like vibrant jewels scattered across the green carpet of

leaves, and the trees swayed gently in the breeze. The Butterfly felt a sense of freedom and joy it had never known before. It fluttered from flower to flower, sipping nectar and making new friends among the other butterflies. As the days went by, the Butterfly explored far and wide, its dreams finally realized. It visited sparkling streams, majestic mountains, and fields of blooming flowers. Everywhere Butterfly went, it shared own story of transformation, inspiring other caterpillars to embrace their own journeys.

One day, while resting on a sunflower, the Butterfly spotted Elderwing gliding gracefully towards its. It fluttered up to meet, with the heart full of gratitude. - Thank you, Elderwing, Butterfly said, its wings shimmering in the sunlight. Thank you for guiding me and believing in my dreams.

Elderwing smiled, his eyes twinkling with pride.

- You did it all yourself, little one. Your courage, determination, and dreams carried you through.

Remember, the journey is as important as the destination. Now, you can inspire others to find their own paths to transformation.

And so, the Butterfly continued to explore the world, with light heart and free spirit. The Butterfly never forgot the journey it had undertaken and the dreams that had led it to the sky. And every time seeing a tiny caterpillar looking up with longing, it would flutter down and share own story, reminding them that with courage and perseverance, they too could transform and soar among the clouds.

Chapter 5

“The Change of Young Soul”

Almas's life changed beyond her wildest dreams after accepting Mrs. Fariza's offer. Mrs. Fariza, realizing Almas's potential, decided to educate her not only as a professional architect but also as a spiritual leader.

When Almas came downstairs, Thomas greeted and escorted her to the car, opened the door and smiled. It seemed that Thomas was most pleased that Almas had entered their lives. Mrs. Fariza had already gotten into the car, and after Almas arrived, they set off.

- First, I want to take you to the tailor, and then go shopping together. Finally, we will go to a beauty salon and cosmetology clinic for personal care. **IT'S TIME FOR A CHANGE.**

They started the day at an exclusive tailor's boutique in the city center. The elderly tailor, who paid attention to detail, took the exact measurements of Almas's slender figure and consulted with Mrs. Fariza about the styles of the clothes she would make. She prepared a new wardrobe for Almas' new role. Each piece was carefully selected for its quality and elegance. The tailor worked very carefully, making sure that every stitch was perfect, and then began to create a simple but stylish series of outfits.

Later they visited some of the most luxurious brand stores. Mrs. Fariza spared no expense and chose the most elegant bags, shoes and accessories. She was greeted with incredible respect in every store she entered, all the salespeople and store managers stood before her. Almas hesitated while choosing, and when she reached for something, she involuntarily looked at the salespersons. The incident at the airport was still a trauma in her mind. Mrs. Fariza noticed Almas's discomfort and slowly approached her:

- I see that something is bothering you, Almas. Is everything okay? If there is something that is bothering you, you can tell me without hesitation.

- I have never shopped in such expensive stores. I feel as if the salespersons understand immediately that I do not belong here.

- I understand, but remember that you are no longer that poor girl, - she said, calmly and kindly, putting her hand on Almas's shoulder, trying to calm her down, - These people and many more people you will meet in your life will exist to serve you. Of course, you will see many people who envy you, with a smile on their lips and hatred in their eyes. You must learn to properly manage the financial power that I will give you. You must not crush people with this power, and you must not be crushed by it yourself. Think of this financial power as an invisible crown that you carry on your head. If you bow your head too low or raise it too high in front of people, you won't be able to carry this crown, it will slip off your head. I know it will be hard for you to carry this crown, but you will get used to it in time.

Almas smiled at her, accepting her thoughts. Then they were a paradise of luxury, where the windows sparkled with diamonds, emeralds and sapphires, illuminated by special lighting to make the luxury jewelry even more brilliant. Mrs. Fariza chose several delicate and elegant sets of pearls and diamonds for Almas. She also chose a white gold wristwatch decorated with diamond studs. Almas was amazed when she looked at all the items Mrs. Fariza had chosen.

They stopped for lunch at a lovely café overlooking Lake Zurich. After dinner, as they sipped their lattes and gazed out at the peaceful view, Almas could no longer contain her gratitude for Mrs. Fariza. Today was not just about shopping for her; it was a journey of self-discovery and growth.

- Thank you, Mrs. Fariza, - Almas began, with voice full of emotion, - You have given me more than just these things. You have given me a confidence in myself that I never had before," she concluded, with eyes shining with a childlike innocence.

Mrs. Fariza smiled kindly and replied:

You deserve everything, Almas. Remember, this is just the beginning. There is more to come.

Almas nodded, feeling a new sense of purpose and excitement for the future. The transformation of a young soul had truly begun.

They spent the rest of the day on Bahnhofstrasse, one of the most exclusive shopping streets in the world. Bahnhofstrasse was bustling, the sidewalks filled with elegant shoppers and tourists

admiring the elegant windows. The air was filled with the aroma of freshly brewed coffee from nearby cafes and the murmur of people chatting. The street was like a magnificent painting, with its cleanliness, beautiful, well-kept facades, and the occasional gleam of expensive cars passing by.

Mrs. Fariza took Almas to one of the most famous beauty salons on this street. The salon's interior was designed in an elegant, modern style. Luxurious carpets and sparkling mirrors dazzled the eye. A stylishly dressed woman who was about the same age as Mrs. Fariza greeted them and said:

- Mrs. Fariza, it's always nice to see you in our salon, - she said, turning to Almas, - so you are Almas right? Mrs. Fariza mentioned you on the phone this morning.

The head of the beauty salon seated Almas in a luxurious chair and personally began work. Although Almas loved her long, black hair very much, she did not have the time, desire or financial means to give it the proper care. The master convinced her and cut her hair, if it was below her shoulders. Almas felt very comfortable as the master's skillful hands moved through her hair, she had loved having someone play with her hair since childhood. After the master finished, Almas looked at herself in the mirror and barely recognized the young girl looking back at her. She had transformed from a simple girl into a well-groomed princess.

The last stop on their adventure today was the cosmetology center. The cosmetology clinic had a calm and harmonious atmosphere with its dim lighting and minimalist design. The staff greeted them warmly and performed a series of skin care procedures that brightened and refreshed Almas's skin. Without any artificial intervention, the cosmetologist carefully selected products suitable for Almas' skin type, ensuring that her skin was radiant and flawless.

Almas, who finally returned home after a long and tiring day, asked for permission from Mrs. Fariza and went up to her room to sleep early. When she entered her room, her shopping bags were nowhere to be found. All the shopping done during the day had been delivered to the house. Almas threw herself on the bed with difficulty, unpacking the bags, and fell into a deep sleep like a baby.

The next morning, when Almas opened her eyes, she saw Mariam in room. All the things she had bought since yesterday had been put away, and now Mariam was arranging Almas's new accessories in front of the mirror. Seeing Almas awake, Mariam said:

- Good morning, sleepy cat, - she smiled.

- Good morning, Ms. Mariam. I think I slept a lot, huh? - she said and rubbed her eyes. Then she reached for the phone and tried to check the time.

- Exactly 12 o'clock! Thank you, you must have been very tired yesterday. I hope your body has rested well. In the meantime, you can stop buzzing like a bee.

- What do you mean, buzzing like a bee?

- Misssss, Misssss - there's no need for that. You can just call me Mariam, - she said to Almas with a smile.

- Aaa.. I understand, okay, I'll try. Thank you very much... Thank you very much, Mariam. By the way, is Mrs. Fariza awake yet? It was a bit bad that I slept so much on my first day of work.

- She's awake and already eating breakfast. If you don't want to be hungry all day in the company, you'd better hurry up. Change your clothes and fix your hair. I've prepared one of the suits you bought yesterday, it will suit you very well, - she said and eagerly took out the suit she had ironed and hung up from the closet. She didn't forget about shoes and bag either.

Almas quickly washed her face, got dressed, and sat down in front of the mirror. Mariam combed her hair and tidied it up neatly. When Almas went downstairs, Mrs. Fariza was no longer there. It had been a long time since Mrs. Fariza had personally visited the company.

Although she did not go to the company herself, she conveyed all the decisions she made for many years through Darvish, and did not allow anyone to play around in the company. She had finished her meal earlier and retired to office. Almas ate delicious pastries and drank coffee. Before Mrs. Fariza arrived, she went to the door and started waiting for her. Mrs. Fariza arrived a little later and said:

- I hope you are ready. Today will be a big day, - and got into the car.

Almas immediately took her place in the back seat of the car, next to Mrs. Fariza, and they set off. The black Audi A8 stopped in front of a magnificent-looking building. After Thomas opened the door for Mrs. Fariza, Almas and Darvish got out of the car one by one. An important part of Almas's development would take place in this company. It was clear to everyone that this first moment when Mrs. Fariza, Almas and Darvish entered the company's headquarters together was very important. The design of the headquarters building was an indicator of Mrs. Fariza's taste and power. Its sleek, modern lines and large panoramic windows made this building stand out in a neighborhood of other companies.

All eyes were on them as they walked into the large hallway. The employees were whispering with envy about the identity of the young girl who was accompanying their gorgeous leader. Although some of them had seen Almas in the competition, it was difficult to identify Almas with her new style and style. Mrs. Fariza walked with her usual authoritative demeanor, accompanied by Darvish, while Almas stood a little behind, trying to absorb the weight of new job.

Mrs. Fariza reached the circular center of the hallway, turned to the staff gathered around, pointed to Almas, and introduced her:

- Almas Nielk, - her voice echoed in the emptiness of the hallway. As soon as the first sentence came out of her mouth, everyone around her fell into absolute silence, - This young lady will join our company as a young architect. I ask all of you to show to her the same respect and support you have shown me.

Some of the staff nodded more enthusiastically than others. Almas felt a mixture of excitement and tension. She knew there was a lot to prove here. Mrs. Fariza told Almas to close the door after everyone had entered the large conference room. Almas approached the door with a look of fear and excitement in her eyes and slowly closed it.

* * *

The door of the meeting room opened, Almas thanked the participants with a folder in her hand, and left the meeting room with confident steps. A full year had passed since Almas first stepped into the company building. She had already completely changed, becoming the young lady as Mrs. Fariza wanted. Almas, worked hard to develop herself from the very first day, constantly attended workshops and seminars on architecture, and took lessons on project management from the company's most experienced architects. Almas's eagerness to learn, her diligence, and her polite behavior among the company's employees had attracted everyone's attention. Darvish and Mrs. Fariza always had one eye on her. In her free time, they would find her sometimes in the company library, sometimes strengthening her theoretical knowledge, sometimes drawing technical drawings. At work, she would try to fulfill whatever task anyone gave her. Mrs. Fariza wanted Almas to participate in every stage of the company's projects and be in full control of the work. After each project was approved on paper, Almas personally participated in every stage of its implementation process. Starting from the pouring of the foundation of the building being constructed, checking the workmanship of the craftsmen, controlling the materials used, from the most basic stages of architecture to the interior design, participating from scratch in the furniture solution of the project, and even in the production processes of the furniture, in a very short time, she became a well-educated, young cadre with comprehensive experience. At the end of a year, when Almas walked the corridors of the company, her aura radiated not the complacency arising from ego, but the self-confidence arising from education and experience. Although her character in responsibility and seriousness was similar to Mrs. Fariza, Almas's compassionate heart turned her into a gentle person who shared everyone's pain and tried to help everyone as much as she could. She was both serious and kind, strong and gentle at the same time.

Over time, Almas had become accustomed not only to the company, but also to the mansion. Weekends had become a time when the household devoted itself to their favorite activities. Although Almas's life was very busy during the week, she loved these two relatively quiet and peaceful days on the weekends in a different way. Almas had found a sense of true family warmth here that she

had never experienced in her life. The mansion had a special rhythm to Saturdays and Sundays. After a busy work week, Almas looked forward to the quieter and more intimate moments to spend with Mrs. Fariza, Mariam, Darvish, and Thomas. Mornings usually began with Mariam in the spacious kitchen. This woman with a compassionate heart and warm attitude had taken Almas under her "wings". During these quiet mornings, Mariam taught Almas how to cook. This was an activity in which Almas was not very experienced. They spent hours together. Mariam patiently explained to Almas the steps of preparing traditional dishes. One day, Mariam said with her usual kind smile:

- The secret to a perfect meal is patience and love. You must add them slowly to the food you are cooking, allowing the flavors to blend.

Almas felt that this process, which provided a pleasant contrast to the stressful working conditions in the office, was very relaxing for her. She loved the aroma of herbs and spices filling the kitchen, the sound of boiling pots, and the pleasure of cooking something delicious with own hands. It was at such moments that she felt that she was getting closer to having the family warmth she had longed for all life.

In the afternoons, Almas often went to visit Darvish, who was working in the garden of the mansion. The area of the garden was very large and was surrounded by a landscape design that seemed to go on forever. A meticulous gardener Darvish had an amazing talent for growing flowers and was always proud of his "creations". Together they would walk around the flower beds, tending to various plants and planting new ones. One day, Darvish said to Almas as they walked among the flowers:

- You know, Almas, gardening is not much different from architecture. Both require patience, attention to detail and a special way of looking at what we want to create.

Almas nodded in agreement, appreciating the wisdom in Darvish's words. She admired Darvish's reserved and steadfast nature, qualities that made him an invaluable teacher and friend. Their conversations in the garden often consisted of a mixture of anecdotes and deeper thoughts about life. Darvish guided Almas in

the right direction, helping her both personally and professionally, thus protecting and nurturing her as if she were a delicate flower.

Thomas would join them as the sun began to set. He had become the image of an older brother to Almas. His kind, calm nature and sense of humor made Thomas a pleasure to spend time with. Thomas's ever-present smile, accompanied by his rosy cheeks, made Almas feel at ease and friendly around him. In the evenings, the two of them would often chat over tea. Once Thomas asked Almas:

- Have you ever watched the stars in the countryside? Far from the city lights, they shine in a completely different way here.

So, they would sit together on weekends, watching the stars, sharing stories about their past lives and dreams for the future. Thomas always found a way to make even the most ordinary moments feel special, and Almas loved them. He would often end the evening with a simple toast; they would clink glasses of lemonade or tea against the night sky to celebrate their friendship and joy.

The weekends spent with them had become the highlight of Almas's week. The mansion, which she had once considered awe-inspiring but terrifying, had become her home thanks to the people who filled it with love, care, and respect. Through the shared memories, Almas's relationship with the people who lived there deepened, and she began to see them as family in the truest sense of the word. It was through this that Almas truly began to understand what home meant and the sense of connection it created.

Over the years, Almas had certainly not forgotten the purpose of her invitation to this mansion. Gradually redesigning the mansion was on the list of important tasks she did on weekends. Although the mansion was a magnificent building full of history and grandeur, time had worn out some of its parts, and some of its parts no longer matched their original grandeur. Since she had dreamed of having her own room since childhood, she began redesigning the house from own room. The room she was given was originally decorated with large furniture in heavy, dark tones and thick curtains. Almas replaced it with calm and warm tones. She chose a palette of delicate pastel tones complemented by minimalist furniture that balanced comfort and elegance. The large windows were freed from heavy curtains, allowing natural light to enter the room. A white bed was

placed in the center of the room and a nightstand on either side of it. Although white took the main place in the interior of the room, tones of pink found their place in the bedding, lamps and decorative pillows. A mirrored dressing table and a chair were placed in the corner opposite the bed, and a large, three-door wardrobe with mirrors on the doors was placed on the right side. Almas, of course, reserved the remaining empty corner of the room for her favorite pastime. A light pink armchair and an extension for stretching her legs were placed here. The bookshelf also found its place next to this armchair. Finally, the redesign of the room was completed with the addition of plants and decorative frames. The walls of the room were finished in the most delicate, light shade of pink, and the plinth and cornice were finished in white, framing the overall appearance of the room as if it were a work of art. This room perfectly reflected Almas's inner world; simple, tasteful, free from any pretensions, reflecting the soul of a little girl. Almas was excited while choosing every detail of the room, and when she looked at the finished design, she was happy like a child. Mrs. Fariza also liked this design and appreciated Almas's diligence.

As Almas continued to redesign the mansion, she came across a room that had not been used for years. The door was unlocked, and curiosity led her to enter. In fact, Mrs. Fariza had never forbidden Almas from entering any part of the mansion, including her own. Although Almas had the entire mansion at her disposal, she instinctively hesitated when entered this room. This room was different from the others; smaller, more intimate. The wallpaper was faded, the bed and furniture were neatly arranged. It was clear that this room had once belonged to someone young and full of life. Almas noticed a photograph on the dresser and moved to take a closer look. It was a photograph of a girl, her eyes shining with joy, smiling. The room was filled with small, personal items. Pictures, figurines, and a music box that seemed untouched since it had last been used. As Almas stood there, trying to sense the aura of the room, she heard a faint footstep behind. When she turned around, she saw Mrs. Fariza standing in the doorway, her expression a mixture of sadness and nostalgia.

- I see you've found Ela's room, - Mrs. Fariza said quietly as she entered.

- I'm sorry. I think I've entered a place I shouldn't have entered, - she replied, feeling guilty for trespassing on such a private space.

Mrs. Fariza said quietly:

- It's okay, Almas. I forgot to warn you about this room. And, perhaps, it's time for someone else to see this room. Since she... left, I haven't felt like touching anything here.

She walked to the dresser and took the photograph in her hand, running her fingers lightly over the frame.

- Ela, my daughter, was full of the joy of life. She dreamed of becoming an artist because she was elegant and talented. This room was her world; It was a place full of hopes, laughter and innocence.

Almas listened to Mrs. Fariza with a pang of sadness as she continued to speak.

- The day she graduated from high school, she was taken from me forever. Those who wanted to see me torn apart used her as a pawn. At that time, my company had applied to participate in a very big project. If it was approved, which it would be, Keystone Global Holdings would be the main shareholder of this project as the lead-executing party of the multi-million-dollar construction project. Since I had prepared perfectly with my entire team, I would have won by defeating my competitors fairly. However, the competitors wanted to trap me in the most unfair and despicable way. They knew about my professional principle and my power in the business. They blackmailed me into withdrawing from the project by kidnapping my most important asset, my only daughter, from her graduation party. When I received the first phone call with the threat, I thought of nothing but my daughter's safety. I immediately called the company's general lawyer and told him to withdraw all our appeals. And I, Fariza Rahimi, begged someone for the first time in my life, I begged the stranger I was talking to on the phone not to harm my daughter. I said that I had already done whatever they wanted and asked for my daughter to be returned to me. They said that they would contact me, hung up the phone in my face, and the phone never rang again.

A few hours later, there was a knock on the door of the mansion. Although I opened the door excitedly, it was not my daughter who

came, but a group of police officers. They took off their hats, apologized, and offered their condolences. While I was waiting for my daughter, I received the news of her death. Although her ID card was found on, I was taken to the morgue to confirm whether the body really belonged to her or not. There can be no greater suffering in life for a mother. On the way, the police officer told me where and in what condition they found the body. They had kidnapped Ela from the restaurant where the party was held on the night of her graduation. They had injected her with drugs so that she would not remember anything that had happened. But Ela's body had surrendered, unable to withstand the effects of the drugs.

Mrs. Fariza's voice began to tremble as she recalled the details:

- They had thrown my angel-like daughter, who would not even hurt an ant, into the garbage dump behind the restaurant where the party was held, pretending to be a drug overdose. They had thrown my daughter, whom I had avoided hurting even when I stroked and kissed, whom I had protected even from the shadow of a rose, who had slept on silk sheets and worn silk clothes since she was born, into a dirty corner like garbage. When they arrived at the morgue, the lifeless body of my doll-like daughter was now lying in this cold room, on a metal table. Even her lips and eyelids, bruised by the effects of drugs, and her pale skin couldn't spoil her beauty. But there was something else wrong with this image. Those vile people had not only defiled my daughter's body, but also her soul. I wanted to open my daughter's eyelids and look into them for the last time. At that moment, I saw such an expression in those dead, lifeless eyes that my mind went crazy. When Ela was alive, it was as if she always spoke with her eyes. It was enough to look into her eyes to understand what she wanted to say and what she felt, because her eyes never lied. This time they spoke again, the eyes of my daughter, whom I loved more than my life, spoke to me for the last time. They seemed to be questioning me. My daughter's voice suddenly came to my mind, - *"Where were you, mama? When I was kidnapped, when I was tortured, when my soul was separated from my body, where were you, mama? Why didn't you protect me, mama? After all, you always protected me from everyone. Why couldn't you protect me this time, mama?"* - the questions echoed in my mind, and began to echo. Unable to bear the feelings I was experiencing any longer, I covered my ears with both hands and started to cry loudly. I fell to

the ground, having a nervous breakdown from the stress I was experiencing. The doctors immediately gave me an injection and anesthetized me. The last thing I saw was my daughter's hand dangling from the morgue table...

After the tragic death of my daughter, I spent a long time in a neuropsychiatric dispensary receiving treatment. I withdrew from work and life. Weeks later, the doctors allowed me to go home for the first time. There was nothing from the clinic at home either. I spent the whole day on the veranda from sunrise to sunset. Months after that incident, the only person I was able to communicate with for the first time was Darvish. I hired him as a gardener the day before my daughter's graduation. We had never had the chance to have a proper conversation. Darvish is a man who knows how to choose every word and talk. It was only thanks to him that I was able to come back to life over time. Even though he has no higher education, Darvish is strangely able to understand people better than many professional psychologists and share their pain. At first, he just started talking about simple things such plants, and as he continued his conversations, I felt something strangely change inside me, little by little. It was as if the wounds bleeding inside me were trying to heal. Every day I came to my senses a little more. But I was determined not to return to work. If I hadn't known that there were thousands of employees living off the salaries they received from my company, I would have closed my entire business without a second thought. I distanced myself from everyone I knew, retreated into solitude. In the meantime, Darvish became the only person I trusted. One morning I called my lawyer and gave him instructions. Legally, I made Darvish the full authority in the company after me, entrusting him with all the company's work. During the day, he would manage the work for me, and in the evening, he would tell me everything that happened in the company and in the construction sector in general and receive a list of instructions from me for the next day. Since then, I have been carrying a piece of ice in my heart. Even though I occasionally went out into the world, I didn't trust anyone, I didn't have close contact with anyone. Until I saw you. You reminded me of my daughter, the love of her for life. No, I didn't try to put you in Ela's place, of course. Ela is no more with me, but I wanted to help you, protect you, and raise you, even if I couldn't help her, to keep her precious memory alive.

Almas took Mrs. Fariza's hand.

- I'm so sorry, Mrs. Fariza. I can't find any words to comfort you in the face of this tragedy that has befallen you. The only thing I can do is to work even harder from now on to be worthy of you.

Mrs. Fariza said with great difficulty, smiling:

- Thank you, Almas. Meeting you, seeing your strength and enthusiasm, watching you grow, reminded me that I can have a purpose in life.

At that moment, the relationship between these two people deepened more than ever. Almas decided to continue his development with all his might for the sake of Ela's memory. He promised himself to become someone that both Mrs. Fariza and Ela could be proud of.

Almas continued to redesign the mansion without even touching Ela's room. It was the turn of the mansion's library. This library was full of traces of information and history. From the entrance, it was clear that this room was the intellectual heart of the mansion. The walls were surrounded by long bookshelves that stretched up to the ceiling. Each side was decorated with furniture made of dark, shiny red wood, which added a heavy atmosphere to the room. The bookshelves were decorated with intricate ornaments, which gave the shelves a classic, almost Gothic look. Despite the passing of years, the chandeliers that illuminated this space, emitting a weak, golden light, carefully illuminated every corner of the library. The shelves here were filled with books in rows. Almost all the books were bound in a special leather of dark brown and pale green. These covers were slightly worn from decades, even centuries of use. Each of the books was considered an antique, and one was worth tens of thousands of dollars. In the center of the library was a round table placed under a large crystal chandelier. The chandelier was a work of art, with its delicate crystal shards sparkling in the light, scattering pale rainbow colors throughout the room. The table was very large and imposing, and around it was arranged high-backed chairs upholstered in dark green leather. It was obvious that this table was intended for meetings. A large rectangular desk of the same design was placed directly in front of the window, and two armchairs of the same design were placed in front of it. On the

central wall of the library there was a large fireplace, the stone part of the fireplace decorated with intricate floral ornaments. In the cold months, the sound of the burning wood spread throughout the room, and the light of the fire in the hearth cast shadows on the space, creating a mystical aura here. An antique clock hung above the fireplace. The steady ticking of the clock was the only sound that broke the silence in this place with a peaceful atmosphere. There were Josephine armchairs placed separately by the windows. Upholstered in soft green fabric, one could curl up in these armchairs, reading a book silently, alone, and one would not even notice how time passed. The windows were gathered at the edges with ropes, revealing the lush landscape of the garden. The view made the library a perfect place for both reading and contemplation, giving absolute peace to anyone who spent time here. Despite its grandeur, the library had an aura of sincerity. It was a place where time slowed down, where one could escape the cares of the world and lose oneself in the pages of a book. The scent of old paper and shiny furniture filled the air, mingling with the faint scent of firewood from the fireplace on cool evenings. Almas began to dream up ways to redesign the library without destroying its touch of knowledge and history. She replaced the heavy, dusty curtains with elegant, sheer curtains that let in more daylight during the day. Inspired by the Art Deco style, she ordered new light fixtures that gave the room a warm, golden glow.

One day, as she was browsing the books on the shelves, her attention was drawn to a dusty book tucked away in a corner. The title of the book was written in faded, gold letters on the cracked leather cover, "The Legend of the Red Dragon." Curious, Almas carefully set the book down and dusted it off. It felt as if it hadn't been touched in years. Almas went to the corner where the comfortable new Josephine chair she had reupholstered and sat down on the dark brown leather rug with its woolen flowers on it, placing a pillow over it. She had barely started leafing through the book when she fell into a sweet sleep.

In the evening, Mrs. Fariza came to Almas to see the finished redesign of the library. She carefully examined every detail of the new design of the library. Along with Almas's taste, her literacy and experience in the field of architecture had increased, and this was clearly evident in the work she had put forth. Quite satisfied with the

result, Mrs. Fariza appreciated Almas's hard work and invited her to have tea. The sweet conversations carried out in the sound of the gentle fireplace that broke the silence of the evening delighted Almas's soul, and the eyes of the girl inside her sparkled with joy. Suddenly, Almas glanced at the book she had put aside. Taking the book in hand, she said in a soft voice:

- Mrs. Fariza, when I was arranging the books in the library, I found this old book. It reminded me more of a fairy tale. I wonder if you have read this book.

- The Legend of the Red Dragon... So, out of all the books in the library, this book attracted your attention, - said Mrs. Fariza continued with a smile, - Yes, I am familiar with this book. **The Red Dragon is a powerful mythical figure, a symbol, found in the legends of many countries around the world. It represents wisdom, strength and protection. This symbol has always been a source of inspiration for those who strive to lead with purpose and honesty.**

Almas leaned forward with the excitement of a small child, her eyes shining, without blinking:

- There is a lot in the story that resonates with me. I feel that the life path that the dragon has taken is similar to my life. This is a story about finding your true power and using it to protect others.

Mrs. Fariza patted Almas's hair and smiled:

- You are right. You are starting your life path and finding your power not only as an architect, but also as a person who can lead and inspire. I see so much potential in you. **If you believe in yourself, just like in the Legend of the Red Dragon, you can overcome any obstacle and help those in need, because you have that source of wisdom and strength.**

Their conversation made a very pleasant impression on Almas's soul. Almas, without knowing it, held in her hands the symbol that would change her life. A single book, when its time came, would change her entire life, forever inspiring her highest mission in this life.



The Legend of the Red Dragon

*In ancient times, during a battle era when neighboring countries were constantly at war with each other, there was a kingdom built on the slopes of high mountains, with a peaceful lifestyle. According to legend, a creature called the **Red Dragon** controlled these lands centuries ago, ensuring peace and security with its wisdom and power. However, over time, when people's hearts began to be poisoned by greed and ambition, the kingdom fell into chaos, and the dragon decided to no longer protect all those people with disgusting hearts and eyes who saw nothing but wealth and power, so it retreated to a cave in a mountain far from them, waiting for the day when a worthy leader would one day take its power and restore justice.*

In a small village on the outskirts of the kingdom, a girl named Aileen lived with her family. Aileen was a cheerful girl full of love for life. In this village

surrounded by lush fields and forests, she lived peacefully. But one dark night, her whole life was turned upside down. A group of cruel invaders took over the village, burned the houses and killed everyone in their path by putting them to the sword. Although the villagers tried to resist, they could not cope with them due to the overwhelming number of invaders. Aileen's family was among the victims of the attack. She waiting for her father to return in fear and horror in her mother's arms, remembered the last horrific scene that Aileen remembered was the two invaders breaking down the door of their house and dragging her mother by the hair. The only thing her mother could do was push Aileen towards the back exit of the house seconds before the invaders arrived. Since the back entrance of the house was in pitch darkness, the invaders thought that Aileen's mother was alone in the house and did not notice her presence in the darkness. Aileen remained motionless in horror. She had covered her mouth tightly with both hands so that her breathing could not be heard.

The last scene she saw before fleeing was her mother lying on the floor covered in blood, silently moving her lips so that the invaders would not hear her. The woman then died with her eyes frozen shut. Aileen, who had been in shock until that moment, suddenly came to her senses. She walked back and forth without being seen by the invaders and quietly went outside. At that moment, only one word was ringing in her head - "RUN!"

After Aileen left the house and made sure that no one had seen her, she ran towards the forest at lightning speed. Having spent her entire childhood in these lands, she knew every stone and tree here better than anyone. She ran without stopping, and her thoughts were racing through her mind:

- You will never be able to return home again!*
- You will never be able to see your mother again!*
- RUN!*

- You will never be able to be in your father's arms again!

- RUN

It was as if an angel and a devil were fighting in her mind. The devil was trying to fill her mind with negative thoughts, while the angel was constantly bringing her back to the present and waking her up.

- RUN! RUN! RUN!

She ran as fast as her legs could carry her, and the more she ran, the more tired she became. The more she ran, the weaker the screams of the invaders became. The smoke rising from her village filled the air, turning into a bitter memory of the ruins left behind. Her heart was beating fast, her breath was labored, but she couldn't stop. She knew that if she stopped, they would find her. They had taken everything from her; her home, her family... Now all she had was her life. As she continued to run, the forest grew darker and denser. Her little feet caught on rocks and tree roots, and she kept on walking. Finally,

her legs couldn't hold her back and she fell to the ground. Her body was shaking with exhaustion. In the mist that surrounded her, she saw a narrow path leading up the mountain. Desperately, she decided to follow it. As she climbed higher, the path led her to the mouth of a cave hidden among the cliffs. Although the entrance to the cave was dark, cold, and scary, Aileen had nowhere else to go. She entered, her footsteps echoing off the damp rock walls. As she went deeper, the walls of the cave were illuminated by a faint red glow. It was as if this place had an ancient and powerful aura, but Aileen was too tired to notice it.

*Suddenly, a deep roar was heard in the cave and the ground began to tremble. A hot wind blew towards her from the shadows and Aileen froze in horror. A huge dragon emerged from the darkness and blocked Aileen's path. It was the mighty legendary **Red Dragon**. The scales on its body shone like molten fire, as if it were emitting light from another world. Its eyes, shining like a burning ruby, stared at Aileen. Aileen felt the heat*

of the dragon's breath on her face and realized that this was her end. The dragon raised its head back, and when a roar rose from its chest, it prepared to attack. Aileen's mind was racing and the only thing on her mind was her lost family and home. At the moment the dragon was about to attack, she said quietly:

- Mom, Dad, I'm coming to you, - and with a rare calmness that was not seen in a child of that age, she covered her eyes with her hand and prepared for her death. The dragon attacked with all her might, seconds before touching Aileen's face, something suddenly stopped its attack. It lowered head and held face at the same level as Aileen's. After a few seconds of silence, Aileen took her hand away from her face and dared to open her eyes. The dragon's huge face was only a hand's distance from hers, its breath warming her face, but not burning it. The wild expression of anger on the dragon's face had disappeared, the red glow in its eyes had faded. Its roar turned into a soft roar, and it slowly bowed its head. For a moment, their gazes collided. The mighty

Red Dragon and a small, fragile girl who was forcing herself not to cry. At that moment, something changed. The dragon, who had destroyed countless enemies with his fire until now, had sensed something in Aileen. Aileen's brave stand in the face of death, not trying to escape it, but being ready to accept it, suddenly awakened a great power within her, and a red light emerged from her heart and surrounded her. At the last moment, the reason why the dragon suddenly stopped its attack was this familiar red light. Aileen, who was exhausted and scared, finally fall to the ground, the Red Dragon gently extended its huge claw and caught her, not letting her fall. The dragon took her between its wings, warming Aileen's small body, which was about to freeze from the cold, and protected her from the cold. Although she lost consciousness, Aileen felt more comfortable and safer than she had ever felt in her life between the Red Dragon's wings. While she lay unconscious, the dragon began to carefully study her facial features. The Red Dragon, being an ancient and

wise being, knew that this little girl was unlike any human it had ever encountered. There was something special about her, something the Red Dragon could never ignore – Unity.

When Aileen woke up, the first thing she felt was the warmth beneath the dragon's scales. She slowly sat up. Her eyes widened in both fear and curiosity as she looked up at the dragon. The Red Dragon was watching her intently, its gaze shining with a quiet light.

- Why didn't you kill me? - Aileen asked in a whisper.

The Red Dragon bowed head as if pondering the answer to the question. After a moment, its deep, echoing voice filled the cave:

- Because you are different. I feel a fire burning in your soul. Not the fire of destruction, but of something greater.

Tears welled up in Aileen's eyes as she thought of her home, her family, everything she had lost.

- They took everything from me, she whispered, - my family, our village... I have nothing left in life.

The Red Dragon's eyes were not angry, but compassionate. It moved huge body slightly, bending head to bring face closer to Aileen. Then began to speak quietly.

- You may have lost your home, your family, but you are not powerless. The power within you is greater than you think. And remember, you are no longer alone! I am with you! I can teach you how to use the power within you, how to protect yourself and others, and how to establish justice when the time comes.

Aileen's heartbeat with hope and disbelief at the same time, she looked at the Red Dragon.

- Can you really help me?

The Red Dragon nodded slowly.

- I will help you. But you must remember that revenge is not the only way to become strong. You must also

learn patience, wisdom, and mercy. The power I will give you must be used not just for revenge, but for good.

Aileen, still grieving, nodded in agreement. She knew that what she was looking for was not just revenge, she was looking for justice. she didn't want anyone else to suffer like she had, so she decided to learn everything the Red Dragon had to teach her and protect herself and the other children.

Over time, the Red Dragon became Aileen's protector and mentor. It taught her everything it knew; how to fight, how to harness the power of fire, and how to keep her cool in times of danger. Under the Red Dragon's guidance, Aileen not only became stronger, but also wiser. She became skilled in combat. She also learned the importance of kindness and compassion. The Red Dragon's lessons were about spiritual balance, teaching her that true power lies not in simply possessing it, but in knowing when and how to use it.

Thus, the wounds in Aileen's heart healed over time and disappeared.

*As Aileen grew older, her spiritual connection to the Red Dragon deepened. The Red Dragon became not just her savior, but her teacher, her best friend, and her companion on the long journey ahead. On Aileen's eighteenth birthday, dragon gave her the greatest gift of all: the magical **power of a dragon**. It was a power that could be given when a true, unbreakable spiritual bond had been formed between a dragon and a human, and when it had reached the right level.*

- You are ready today, Aileen, dragon said, placing its paw gently on her shoulder. With this power, you will have more power than an ordinary warrior could have, a protector, a savior, a hero, a symbol of goodness in this world. But remember, Dragon power is only as strong as the heart of the warrior who wields it. You must protect your heart from all feelings of malice, envy, and hatred.

As the dragon power flowed through her veins, Aileen felt a strong surge of power and energy, but she managed to maintain her humility, knowing that her goal was not to destroy, but to uphold justice and preserve its continuity.

After years of training under the Red Dragon, Aileen became the only warrior in the world who could use the power and wisdom of a dragon, but her heart remained humble and compassionate, always striving to help those in need. Although the memory of the destruction of her village and the loss of her family never left her, she knew that she had to prevent others from suffering the same fate.

One day, while wandering through the Kingdom, Aileen came across a group of orphaned children. The children were covered in mud, their bodies covered in wounds and disease. But more importantly, their souls were bleeding from invisible wounds. Each of these children had disappeared, and their villages had

been destroyed by the same cruel enemies who had once taken everything from Aileen. It wasn't just Aileen who had grown stronger over the years, of course. The invading horde had also grown stronger, taking control of the country and turning the king into a puppet in their hands. These children, whose lives were destroyed by the invaders, were once like Aileen, trying to carry the pain of their past as a heavy burden in their hearts, crushed under the weight of the burden. Aileen could not turn away from their difficult situation. She took the children to the cave, to the Red Dragon's lair, and offered them to live in this shelter that had once saved her. The dragon spoke to each of the children one-on-one. The children showed it their deepest wounds that they had never told anyone before, told their most hidden secrets, and lightened the weight of their spiritual burdens. They were no longer alone in this life. Finally, someone would heal the wounds that no one else had seen in this life and avenge them. Touched by the pain they carried in the

children's hearts; the Red Dragon made them a solemn promise:

- You are safe here, - its voice echoing in the cave, as long as you are under my protection, no harm will come to you. And when the time comes, I promise you that those who have done you this injustice will face my justice and pay for their evil with their lives, and with the most terrible form of death.

Years passed, and the children grew up in love and peace under the protection and care of the Red Dragon. They were trained and educated by Aileen. She accepted each of these children as her own family. The children considered her their own, like their older sisters. They taught them not only to fight, but also to develop their compassion and strength, which grew with the wisdom and patience that the Red Dragon instilled in them. Although each child carries the wound of their past in their souls, with the healing power of the Red Dragon, they were freed from the pain in their hearts

over time and learned to turn pain into strength and poison into medicine. Thus, in this shelter, they found healing, strength, and their purpose for living. They learned to laugh again, to be loved, to love, in short, to live feeling valuable as human beings. Over time, the dragon regained the loving compassion it had once lost for humans. Unity was exactly that, coming together and complementing each other despite differences and shortcomings. Becoming a force that comes from unity.

Finally, the day of revenge had come. The enemies, who had devastated countless villages and orphaned children like Aileen and others, were preparing to attack the next village. But this time they would not succeed. Aileen had built her own army: an army of warriors empowered by the magic of the Red Dragon. She was the leader of the army, and together they would stand against the forces of destruction. However, there was something that set Aileen apart from the others. Her connection to the dragon was special, not only

through training, but also through a natural spiritual unity. Only someone with a pure heart, a brave spirit, a selfless person who made it her mission to protect the weak and was willing to fight for justice, even risking her life, could have such a connection. Aileen had gained this power, and thus had access to the most powerful magic of the Red Dragon. These magical powers were so rare that armies would fight to obtain just one of them:

1. Power of the Elements: Aileen could control the four elements of nature. Air, fire, water, and earth. The element she wielded most skillfully was fire. With a flick of her hand, she could surround her sword with dancing flames, transforming it into a fiery weapon that could cut through any enemy. The breath of the dragon was a cleansing power that not only destroyed, but also burned away all evil in its path.

2. Power of Immortality: As long as her heart remained pure, no weapon could harm Aileen or kill

any enemy. There was one exception to this power: the one who used it *could only be killed by someone she trusted,* as by its very nature this power was self-defense and would only be active against enemies on its own.

3. The Power of the Unbreakable Armor: This was a special armor made by mixing the blood of the dragon and Aileen into steel melted by the fire of the Red Dragon. This armor could only be worn by the owner of the Dragon's power and only by the person whose blood was used in its creation. This was the most terrifying power that Aileen possessed, because in order to use this power, the owner of the armor could give up his immortality, sacrifice it and perform a special ritual to reach the ultimate power. No human body in the universe could withstand this power. The person who activated the power would transform into an unquenchable, destructive, dragon-shaped flame form, burning all enemies within its radius with a fire that started from the inside and spread outwards, turning

them to ashes. Once this power was used, it could never be stopped, because in reality it was an irreversible death ritual that cost the user their life.

And that great day had come. Aileen and her army attacked the very center of the invaders. This was the final battle, where one of the two sides would be completely destroyed. Those fragile children who had fled barefoot in their wounds years earlier had now grown up, strengthened, and returned to reclaim their land on the giant wings of the Red Dragon. The horizon was covered with storm clouds and the dust cloud that rose from the march of the armies. Aileen stood at the head of her army, directly in front of the battle. Everyone in her army was ready to die and kill as one. Finally, the leader of both armies gave the order to attack and the battle to the death began. Aileen's army, with incredible precision, was laying waste to the enemy with minimal casualties, leaving no survivors. The battle was over when the last enemy fell to the ground and died. Although the army members let out

cries of joy, Aileen had a doubt in her heart. The enemy army could not be so small in number. She ran forward and moved back to the front line, in front of the army, and could not believe the sight she saw. Her eyes widened in excitement, her breath almost caught. The oncoming enemies were rushing towards them in numbers that seemed endless, like an army of ants. The group they had fought before was just a maneuver to measure the strength of Aileen's army and to observe their fighting style, find their weak points, and to make them tired out before they could face the main army. When Aileen saw the horror in her comrades' eyes, she was momentarily taken back to the past, to the first moment she had seen them. Would these children be defeated again? Would these dishonorable enemies be victorious again? The faces of those little children flashed through Aileen's mind at the speed of light. No, she couldn't allow it this time, no matter what the cost. Regardless of all the battle training they had gone through, all their courage, the reality was clear. Aileen

and her army were doomed to be defeated by such a large number of numbers.

Aileen closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and felt the warmth of the Red Dragon's power coursing through her veins. Turning to her friends, she said:

- Do not be afraid, the protector of the Red Dragon's power will never allow anyone to harm her friends. Protect yourself, never forget to lend a helping hand to those in need.

Her companions were confused, because no one knew what Aileen was about to do, only the Red Dragon understood the situation, nodding its head with a deep sense of sadness, as if agreeing to something. As the enemy army approached, Aileen stuck her sword into the ground. Looking up at the sky, she said:

- Creator of all things, I call upon you by your most glorious name. Unleash the fire in my heart, burn my body, turn me into a fire that will burn my enemies until I am reduced to ashes.

At that moment, Aileen's body began to glow with a fierce red light. The flame surrounded her entire body. The warriors of both sides watched in horror as the flames grew brighter and larger, transforming into a giant dragon. This dragon, which was in the form of a flame burning from head to toe, roared. When the enemies heard this roar, they froze in their places in horror, no matter how hard they tried, they could not move. It was as if an invisible hand was holding them. Suddenly, they felt a strange burning sensation inside them, and within seconds, this fire, starting from the heart, turned into a fire that covered their entire bodies. Unable to bear the pain of their burning bodies, the enemies began to scream so terribly that their ears pierced. At that moment, a dragon made of fire appeared right in front of the leader of the invaders. This was the scoundrel who had killed Aileen's mother in front of her eyes years ago. The dragon of fire burned him with such a flame that the screams of this scoundrel covered the whole world. Unlike the others, the dragon

allowed him to move. Wherever this dishonorable man ran, he was surrounded by warriors burning in flames on all sides. The faster he ran, the more he burned. Finally, he came before Aileen's army, knelt down, and came face to face with the children he had once orphaned. The children watched him burn and die in agony without blinking. When it was all over, they heard the sound of a chain breaking in their hearts. It was the sound of the chain breaking, the soul of the burden they had carried in their past. They were FREE now. They hugged each other and took a deep breath. At that moment, the dragon of fire roared and circled above their heads. It came right in front of them and stopped on the ground. It looked at them one last time with its burning fiery eyes. Then it spread both wings. The burning hellfire gradually turned into light, split into pieces and began to rise towards the sky. This light began to shine brighter and brighter. Her companions were forced to close their eyes. When they opened their eyes, Aileen was gone, and only her armor remained. The

Red Dragon approached and picked up the armor with its claw. Turning to the children it had once saved for the last time, it said:

- Aileen sacrificed her life for you. You, the Red Dragon's army, will spread across the world to uphold the victory she won at the cost of her life, to establish justice, to find children like you who need help and protect them.

The Red Dragon flew away and was never seen again. Finally, the kingdom once torn apart by war found peace. And from that day on, the legend of the Red Dragon was told from generation to generation. Members of the Red Dragon's army traveled to different parts of the world, helping and protecting all the orphaned children who were oppressed until their last breath. The Red Dragon and his legacy lived not only in stories, but also in the hearts of those who fought with him and believed in him. According to legend, every tear that falls from the eyes of

orphaned children on earth is collected in the Red Dragon's cup of patience. If there comes a time when children on earth are oppressed and justice is violated to the point where this cup overflows, the Red Dragon will come to earth again with his army, destroy enemies, and save those in need of help.

In the silence of the night, if you listen carefully enough, you can hear the roar of a dragon echoing in the wind, warming the hearts of broken, lonely, abandoned, and helpless children. The Red Dragon retreats into the shadows and is always ready to be a balm to the pain of anyone who calls upon him!

Chapter 6

“The Path of Development Leading to Leadership”

Almas stood in front of the mansion's large window, looking out at the mountains stretching to the horizon, thinking about how much her life had changed in such a short time. A young girl who had lived a modest life just a year earlier, a recent graduate, had now become the right-hand woman of one of the world's most powerful architects. Now, under Mrs. Fariza's guidance, she had become a confident architect with more skills than she could have ever dreamed of. Yet Mrs. Fariza always emphasized that this was just the beginning.

One evening, after a long and tiring meeting, Mrs. Fariza called Almas into the living room, and as usual, the gentleness beneath her stern character showed itself as she spoke to Almas.

Darvish stood silently beside Mrs. Fariza, as usual.

- Almas, - Mrs. Fariza began, - you have made remarkable progress in this year, and at the same time, you have proven your strength of character. You are no longer the new graduate, inexperienced architect that I saw when you first stepped into this mansion. You have successfully completed each stage of the development program that I have intensively designed for you in this year, and you have already embarked on the path to becoming a true leader.

Almas felt proud of Mrs. Fariza's words, but she was equally concerned about the important reason behind summoning her here today. She turned her gaze to Darvish, whom she considered her mentor.

- But there is more to learn, - Mrs. Fariza continued, - Leadership is not just about knowledge and skills. It is about discipline, control and harmony. You need to learn to control not just your mind but your emotions, and that is why I have decided to send you to Japan.

- To Japan?! - Almas repeated, the surprise in her voice clearly felt,
- For how long? And what about the project to build a shelter for young people deprived of parental care? I thought that after gaining

enough experience, I could start the project. And what about those children?

Mrs. Fariza shook her head, a slight smile appeared on her lips.

- Yes, there you will learn the ways of mental and physical discipline and master one of the rarest types of martial arts, a philosophy that will teach you more than just a martial art. It will teach you patience, focus and the discovery of the power within. You will learn from master who understands what it means to be a true leader, not just in the physical sense, but in the spiritual sense as well. I can't give you a precise answer about how long you should go, as the teacher there will decide the duration of your study. But you can be sure that it won't be a short-term sightseeing trip. I repeat what I told you on the first day, you are not obligated to do anything I suggest. I am simply advising you on a way to become the person you want to be, not the person I want you to be. The current era is not the same as the era of my youth. In this era, a leader who wants to rise to the top must be willing to make the most sacrifices and learn to protect himself. As for your question about the shelter, if you have the slightest faith in my words, I personally promise you that after you return from Japan, you will have the strength to build not one, but a hundred shelters at once. There are certain details that I cannot explain to you now, but if you set out on this journey trusting in my word, you will eventually become even stronger than me.

Almas blinked in excitement, trying to comprehend the thoughts she was hearing. After all, she had come here just to work as an architect and realize her project. And now they were talking to her about going to Japan, to master some martial art. Although she didn't understand anything, she trusted Mrs. Fariza endlessly. And, in fact, although no one knew, Japan was Almas's BIGGEST dream in the whole sense of the word. When her father showed her countries on the globe as a child, this country located in the far East had caught her interest. Later, she had watched films and read books about this country. She had always admired the traditions of the Japanese people, the discipline and craftsmanship in their culture. The idea of being able to go to Japan someday was like traveling to a distant fairy tale world for her. Japan was a country with unique features in everything, 180 degrees different from other countries in the world.

Mrs. Fariza felt Almas's excitement and anxiety and said:

- Don't worry, I won't send you to the other side of the world alone, of course. Darvish will also accompany you during your stay in Japan. He has been my personal assistant and confidant for many years, so I trust him more than anyone else. He will be your protector, just as he was for me, and he will never let you be alone.

Almas looked at Darvish. Darvish smiled slightly and nodded. His calm presence had given Almas a sense of peace as usual. Mrs. Fariza stood up, went to Almas, and placed a hand on her shoulder and said:

- You are ready, Almas. You have the character of a leader, but now you must develop your strength and wisdom. When you return, you will not be just an architect, but a leader who can lead others with justice, courage, wisdom, and chastity.

Almas nodded in agreement. The weight of Mrs. Fariza's words had affected her. After all, what she wanted most was to be of help to others. If it meant sacrificing a few years of her life to educate herself, she was willing to do it with love. Going to Japan now is her next mission. It was the first step towards becoming the person she had always dreamed of becoming.

Finally, a week passed and the day arrived for Almas to leave for Japan. That morning, Zurich was shrouded in fog, a sign of Almas's mixed feelings of excitement and sadness. Almas was looking out of her room window for the last time at the view. It was hard for her to leave these strangers she had considered her family after so long. When she turned around, she saw that her suitcase had been left open on the bed. Almas took a deep breath, her heart filled with the excitement of the journey and the anxiety of the challenges ahead. She glanced at the clock, knowing that it was time to say goodbye. At that moment, there was a knock on the door, and it was Mariam. She had come to pick up Almas's suitcases. She smiled at Almas with her usual smile. Almas returned the smile and went downstairs. Mrs. Fariza was waiting for her in the study. She was sitting by the fireplace, her posture as dignified as ever, but her eyes betrayed her emotions.

- Almas, - said Mrs. Fariza began, - Today you are embarking on a journey that will transform you into the leader you are meant to be.

Remember that every lesson is a learning experience. Embrace every experience, every challenge, and learn from every mistake.

Almas nodded, her already troubled heart deeply affected by these words.

- I owe you so much, Mrs. Fariza. You have given me opportunities I could never have imagined, and you have shown me how to make the most of them. Thank you for believing in me,- she said, and leaned down to kiss Mrs. Fariza's hand. This kiss was the ultimate expression of Almas's gratitude toward Mrs. Fariza. It was a custom for a young person to kiss the hand of someone older than her, a sign of gratitude that she accepted her as master and teacher.

Mrs. Fariza, in turn, leaned down and kissed Almas on the forehead. At that moment, it was the union of two people, strangers to each other, one very old, one very young, one at the end of the road, one at the beginning of the road, two women, and most importantly, two souls in this world. They left the room and came to the main entrance door. Darvish, Mariam, and Thomas were lined up and waiting for them. As soon as they saw them, all three bowed respectfully. Almas nodded to them and came to stand in front of Mariam.

- I will miss you very much, Mariam.

- I will miss you very much, Almas. Take care of your food and take good care of yourself. Remember, no matter how far you go, this will remain your home.

Almas's eyes filled with tears:

- Thank you very much for everything, Mariam. Thank you very much for your kindness, advice, and incredibly delicious food.

Mariam smiled softly and wiped the tear that was running down Almas's cheek. She stroked her head and kissed her hair. They hugged tightly for the last time.

- It's time to go. Go and make us all proud. And don't worry, I promise I'll have a feast waiting for you when you get back.

Thomas loaded the luggage into the car, moved to the right of the car, and opened the door for Almas and Darvish. They descended the steps of the mansion and got into the car. Almas rolled down the car

window and waved to Mariam and Mrs. Fariza, who were looking at her for the last time. After they returned the hand, the car moved. As Thomas drove the Audi Q7 quickly through the silent streets of Zurich, Almas sat quietly in the back seat, staring at the scenery passing before her eyes. The city was just beginning to wake up, illuminated by the gentle light of dawn, its historic buildings painted in gold and amber. The cool air typical of the city of Zurich entered through the windows, filling the salon with its freshness. As the car passed by familiar landmarks like the calm Lake Zurich shimmering in the morning light, the quaint cafes lining the narrow, cobblestone streets, and the imposing Gross Münster towering proudly over the city, Almas felt a pang of nostalgia. Everywhere in this city were memories that marked her transformation from a young, inexperienced architect to a confident, talented professional. The quiet rumble of the Audi engine accompanied her thoughts like soft background music. As they approached the airport, the feeling of separation became more real, filling Almas's heart with excitement. The car entered the airport's VIP area. Darvish got out of the car without waiting for Thomas to open the door. At that moment, Thomas and Almas's gazes met in the car's rearview mirror.

- You did it, Almas. Don't worry, you're ready for Japan, - Thomas said.

Almas lowered her head, encouraged by Thomas's gaze.

- Thank you, Thomas. For everything, - Almas answered her. Despite the swirl of emotion inside her, her voice tone was steady. It was an experience she had gained over time from Mrs. Fariza. Almas got out of the car after taking one last look at the peaceful dawn landscape of Zurich.

Thomas helped carry the luggage and touched Almas's shoulder reassuringly:

- Go and cross that path of change, Almas. Show yourself and everyone else what kind of strength you have inside you. You can do it, I believe in you.

As Almas walked towards the entrance of the airport, the early morning sun broke through the clouds and illuminated her path. It was as if it was a sign of the brightness of the future that awaited Almas. Zurich was her current and the best part of her life, but

Japan awaited her - a new part full of unknown adventures. With a final handshake with Thomas, she turned and walked towards the entrance, her steps now determined. Her future awaited her and she was ready to embrace everything that would come her way. For the first time in her life, Almas entered an airport through the VIP entrance. Although Almas did not like the term, it was a part that served the upper class and people seeking privacy. The VIP area, with its luxurious lounges and tasteful artwork adorning the walls, was more like a luxury restaurant than an airport. Almas and Darvish were greeted by two young female VIP receptionists. They passed through a dedicated security checkpoint. The process was seamless and respectful, with a personal approach to making those using it feel both valued and safe without having to wait in long lines. After security, Almas and Darvish were taken to the VIP lounge, where they could relax before boarding the plane. The lounge was spacious, designed with modern Swiss lines and a minimalist aesthetic. Each room was designed to meet different needs and activities. Guests' dining needs were met by the luxurious restaurant service. The bar offered a wide range of drinks, including vintage wines, premium spirits and signature cocktails.

When the flight arrived, Almas was unaware that a luxurious and modern private jet was waiting for them. The guides drove Darvish and Almas directly to the door of the plane in a private car. Almas could not believe her eyes. She knew that Mrs. Fariza was wealthy, of course, but it was very embarrassing to see such respect from her. Almas got off the car first, then Darvish. When they boarded the plane, they were greeted standing by the flight crew. The interior of the plane was the embodiment of the phrase "luxury travel". The cabin was decorated with luxurious white leather seats, a high-quality wooden table, and the seats were equipped with a personal entertainment system with a wide selection of movies, music, and various games.

As soon as Almas and Darvish sat down, a variety of fruits, sweets, and soft drinks were laid out on the table in front of them. The captain of the plane greeted Almas and Darvish, informed them of the flight time and weather conditions, and wished them a pleasant flight. Almas's eyes were filled with delight at the elegance of the silver cutlery and crystal glasses, which she admired as works of art. The flight crew waited inconspicuously outside, trying not to intrude

on Almas and Darvish's personal space. Almas spent most of time watching movies, playing chess, listening to music, and of course, reading books. Darvish shared the same hobbies to cherish her. As the plane approached Japan, the pilot gave instructions for landing. The landing was as smooth as the takeoff, as if the plane had landed on a cushion rather than on the tarmac. When the plane reached the end of the runway, Almas took a deep breath. She was ready to begin a new chapter in her life. Darvish looked at her and bowed. He gestured to the door with his hand and invited Almas to get off the plane. Almas got off the plane excitedly with a childlike smile on his face. She gazed in awe at the natural landscape around Tokyo's Haneda Airport. The sky was clear, and the distant cityscape stretched out, seemingly merging with the sky. As soon as Almas stepped off the plane, she immediately felt as if she had landed on a different planet. This was a new world for Almas, and she was eager and determined to discover all the secrets of this world. Walking beside her, Darvish, as usual, accompanied her with calm steps, never taking his eyes off her for a moment.

They were greeted by a man in a smart, well-dressed suit in front of the VIP terminal. He stood in perfect posture, his hands clasped in front of him, a friendly but serious expression on his face. As Darvish and Almas approached, he greeted them with a traditional Japanese bow, his hands clasped on his knees. His dark hair was slicked back, and his eyes held a sharp, intelligent glint.

- Welcome to Japan, Ms. Nielk and Mr. Mustafa, - he began in a fluent English accent, - My name is Ishikawa. I will accompany you throughout your stay in Japan and assist you in any way you may need. I have been entrusted with your safety and comfort in Japan, as instructed by Mrs. Fariza.

Almas widened eyes in surprise at the formal greeting, but quickly adjusted to the situation and smiled.

- Thank you, Mr. Ishikawa. It's nice to meet you, - she said, trying to master the rules of cultural etiquette, and bowed slightly in return.

Darvish nodded respectfully and said:

- Thank you for your cooperation with us, Ishikawa-san.

Ishikawa quickly directed them to the black Audi Q7 waiting at the very entrance to the terminal. The car was gleaming in the sunlight. Ishikawa opened the back door for Almas and bowed politely. He waited for Almas and Darvish to sit down, closed the door, and got behind the wheel. As Almas sat down in the luxurious ivory leather seats, she witnessed how everything was meticulously prepared on Mrs. Fariza's orders. Although Mrs. Fariza herself was now across the ocean, her financial power and influence were evident here, and her orders were carried out without fail. As the car moved away from the airport and entered the highway, the silhouette of Tokyo began to appear before them. The city was a mix of tall, modern skyscrapers and traditional low-rise buildings. The streets were bustling, but the Audi drifted through the city, insulated from the noise and chaos outside. Along the way, Ishikawa shared brief tidbits about the city's history and culture. His voice was calm and reserved, but it was clear that he was educated and proud of his country.

- Tokyo is a city of contrasts, - he said, - It's one of the most developed cities in the world, but it always embraces its traditions and culture. The balance between old and new is what makes it truly unique.

Almas looked out the window, taking in the sights. The streets were bustling with people, businessmen in crisp suits, children in neat school uniforms, and women in traditional kimonos, all walking at their own pace amidst the modern hustle and bustle. The delicate light from the lanterns of temples and shrines nestled between the large, glass-fronted skyscrapers illuminated the streets, reflecting ancient Japan amidst the city's ultra-modern design. After passing through lively neighborhoods filled with neon signs and loud advertisements, they gradually moved into quieter, more traditional neighborhoods. The contrasts of Tokyo were truly striking, one moment surrounded by skyscrapers, the next by streets lined with small houses and gardens. As the drive continued, Almas fell under the spell of the city. She leaned head back and closed eyes for a moment, the rhythmic movement of the car calming her like a child rocking in a hammock. Ishikawa occasionally glanced at them in the rearview mirror.

- We'll be in the village soon, - he said in a friendly but professional voice.

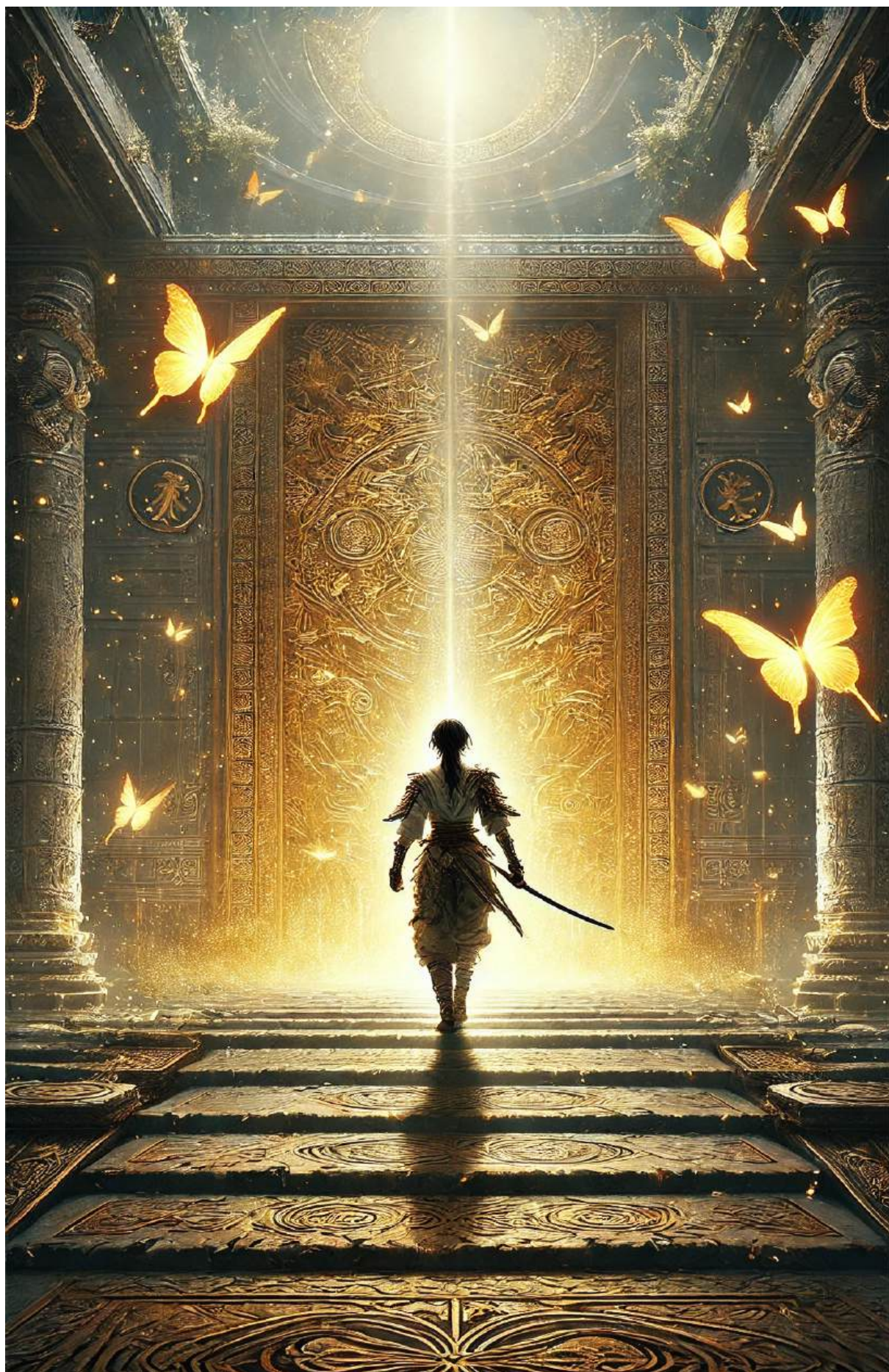
As they left the city behind and headed toward the mountains, the landscape began to change. The hills, winding roads, and tall trees, covered in dense, lush vegetation stretched endlessly. The air felt fresher, cleaner, the peaceful silence of nature replacing the noise of the city. Finally, the roads narrowed and the car stopped in front of an ancient ryokan. Ishikawa got out of the car and opened the door for Almas first.

- Welcome to your life in Japan, Ms. Nielk!

Almas got out of the car and admired the view of the ryokan. It was a breathtaking sight. The wooden structure of the building blended perfectly with the surrounding nature, its sloping roof and stone paths, creating a sense of peace and balance. Sakura trees were planted in rows at the entrance, the petals of the sakura falling gently in the breeze, covering the road like a delicate pink carpet.

- You will spend your first night in this traditional Japanese inn. If you need anything, please let me know, no matter what time it is.

Almas nodded, her heart filled with gratitude, and she turned gaze to Darvish. Darvish looked at her with an encouraging smile. And so, with the towering Japanese mountains surrounding her and a gentle breeze promising new beginnings, Almas stepped forward, ready to begin the next phase of her life's journey.



The Way of the Samurai:

The Temple of Forty Doors

In the shadow of Japan's sacred Mount Fuji, there was a temple where ancient forests whispered with the wisdom of centuries and Sakura blossoms filled the air with the delicate scent. Hidden by ancient spells from those whose hearts were not pure, this temple was said to hold the key to wisdom that would lead a person to the truth of their own self. Because it had 40 chambers inside, it was called the "Temple of Forty Doors" in legends. According to legend, each door hid a unique test behind it. These tests were a spiritual testing center designed to test the heart and purity of the warrior's emotions and make him reveal the true extent of his strength. A warrior who can go to the end of the road and overcome all the tests, discovers the

supreme strength of his soul, soul, mind and body, and gains invincible power. Although it has been searched for by thousands of warriors for centuries, no one has ever been able to find the entrance to this temple. On a special day of each year, young men who had entered adolescence were sent to search for this temple to strengthen their warrior spirit. According to the ancient laws of my village, all samurai leaders were required to send their sons to search for it at the appointed time. Now, the turn had come to this village near Mount Fuji, and all the teenagers of the village lined up and waited for the chief samurai's order. According to the rules, in this small group of young men, there was a girl who secretly joined the group without anyone's knowing. This girl's twin brother, Akira, had fallen seriously ill during the week of the trial and was bedridden. Not only have the strength to go on a search, he did not even have the strength to stand. In order to protect the samurai honor and not bring shame to the family name, Hana secretly hid her hair

inside her helmet, put on her brother's battle armor, and pretended to be her brother, joining the group. Since they were twins, no one could make out Hana's face under the helmet, which looked exactly like her brother, in the darkness of the night. After the group entered the forest to search, Hana left them, her goal was to hide somewhere for the night without anyone realizing she was a girl, and to join the other group members in the morning and return to the village. This search was just a routine anyway. How could a girl find something that no one else could find? The very idea of it seemed so stupid to her. She went behind a huge tree and sat down on the ground, and a few minutes later fell asleep. She woke up with a very strange feeling, as if someone had whispered her name. Hana got up in a hurry and began to look around carefully. Only herself knew that she took her brother's place. But who could it be that was calling her by name? The voice began to call her name again. No, Hana was no longer asleep, so this voice calling her from nowhere could not be a dream or a

vision. With a deep sense of curiosity and fear, Hana followed the voice. Finally, the voice calling her stopped when she came to a rock covered in ivy. When Hana stopped right in front of the rock, the ivy magically moved aside and an ancient, double-leafed door appeared. Hana realized the truth with lightning speed, there it was! The entrance to the Temple of Forty Doors! She could not believe that fate had smiled on this teenage girl among hundreds of people for centuries. Suddenly, the doors swung open, revealing the light of a burning torch. Hana excitedly took the torch in her hand and walked inside. After a few steps, a door appeared in front of her. This was the first of 40 doors. When Hana pushed open the first door, she entered a chamber dimly lit by the flickering light of torches attached to the ancient stone walls.

The air was cool, and the chamber smelled of earth and incense. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she saw someone sitting cross-legged in the middle of the chamber, as motionless as the statues that surrounded

the chamber. It was an old samurai, his armor laid out beside him, and he stood silently. His hair was as white as the peak of Mount Fuji, and his eyes reflected the depth of one who had attained the wisdom of centuries.

- Welcome, young warrior, - the old samurai's voice echoed off the ancient walls of the temple, - I am Takeshi, the guardian of the first gate of the temple.

Hana bowed respectfully and greeted the old samurai in the manner of a warrior. Her fear subsided as she heard the old samurai speak.

- I want to pass the tests of the temple of forty doors, - she said. Hana's voice sounded braver than she felt.

Takeshi slowly raised his head. His gaze locked with Hana.

- You carry the spirit of a true samurai, but this path requires more than just fighting skills, - he said. His eyes narrowed slightly as he looked at Hana, - Here you will not only fight physical opponents, but also your own heart, the shadows in the darkness of your

soul. Tell me, what do you want to find at the end of these trials?

Hana fell silent, thoughts racing through her mind.

- I want to reveal the power I know is within me, to reach my true self, my identity, in short, the absolute truth about myself.

Takeshi smiled sarcastically and said:

- It's interesting, you say you came to find the truth, but you came here by lying to others and putting yourself in the place of someone you are not. You cannot find the truth on the path you have taken with lies. Take off your helmet and admit who you are.

Hana's eyes widened in fear. Samurai laws were strict, and these laws did not allow women to fight, or rather, to have the same rights as men. Takeshi continued with a smile:

- Do not be afraid, young warrior. Courage, honor, and wisdom have no gender. Although society tries

to make women appear weaker than men, all this is in fact nothing more than a fabrication of ignorant and insecure people. Being a woman does not make you inferior to the opposite gender. On the contrary, coming here today at the cost of your life shows that you are even more courageous and brave than male fighters, - he said, motioning for Hana to approach with his hand, - Before you begin the trials, allow me to share with you the rules of the temple. At each door you open, a new side of your soul will be tested. If you overcome all the trials, you will become not only an invincible warrior, but also a very wise person, - then he gave her a small, delicately crafted wooden medallion, decorated with ancient symbols of the samurai, and added, - Always carry this with you as a reminder of your purpose in embarking on this path and as a protection against the darkness you may encounter.

Taking the medallion in her hand, Hana felt a warmth spreading through her fingers, reviving her spirit. She bowed deeply to Takeshi and said:

- Thank you, wise protector.

Takeshi bowed in acknowledgement of Hana's successful passage through the first gate, and then, as he vanished into thin air, his final words echoed:

- Congratulations, young warrior. I grant you the permission to pass through the first gate.

Hana took a deep breath and stepped forward, her heart steady and determined. The test of the first gate was to measure the warrior's purpose and sincerity. Hana had passed that test. She was ready for the second.

The Second Door: Chamber of Envy

When Hana pushed open the second door, she entered a chamber that was a sharp contrast to the simplicity of her own life. The walls of the chamber were hung with large mirrors. These mirrors suddenly became frames that opened onto another world and began to

reflect the lives of different young girls of Hana's age. Suddenly, Hana heard a voice from the distance:

- Look at the lives of these beautiful young girls of your age, - the owner of the voice whispered in a kind but cunning tone, - Do you see how beautiful they are? Do you see the magnificent carriages waiting at their doors, the expensive clothes they wear, the gold and precious stones adorning their wrists and necks? Look at the silk ribbons they wear, the neat and perfect hairstyles. Look at the delicious food they eat in front of them, the different sweets, the various fruits that you don't even know the name of, - the voice from the unseen continued.

Every detail it highlighted was shown to Hana in a large-scale view in a mirror. The young girls in the background laughed happily and carefree, twirling around in their elaborate dresses, touching the rings on their fingers, and blowing their hair into the air. Their hands, white and soft as cotton, their neatly painted nails, moved between the silk ribbons tied to their hair,

and then they reached for the food in front of them, leisurely eating it. These young girls looked like princesses in the truest sense of the word.

- Now look at your reflection in the mirror, - the voice ordered Hana, pulling her attention away from the elaborate scenes and turning it to a mirror that showed her reflection. Hana, who looked like a boy, wearing samurai armor that didn't even belong to her.

- Ask yourself, why aren't you rich like them? Why don't you have such a wonderful life? You're all the same age, but while they're enjoying their youth, you're struggling to just survive. While they're eating all the delicious food they want, you can't eat anything but a bowl of rice most of the time. While they buy the best clothes and jewelry, you can barely meet your most basic needs. And now ask yourself, is all this fair? Why can't you live in beauty and comfort while they live? Why them? Why not you? Why? Why? Why?

As these questions and images attacked her mind like invisible arrows, a feeling of torment, anger, and envy surged through Hana. For a moment, her heart trembled with the weight of jealousy and anger. The contradiction of the scenes before her tore her heart apart cruelly. At that moment, a snake crawled out of the shadows towards Hana with a sword in its mouth. It approached and placed the sword in its mouth right in front of Hana. It was this snake that had the voice from the unseen. It whispered:

- Deep down in your heart you know what you must do, you can no longer endure these pains that wound your soul. You must take this sword in your hand and either kill those who are happier than you, or yourself.

The snake's words worked like poison on Hana's soul. As if under hypnosis, she repeated:

- To die or to kill... - She involuntarily reached out for her sword. At the last second, a magical force covered

her eyes. The surrounding darkness became pitch black, and all sounds were silenced. The face of her sick brother appeared before Hana's eyes, his helpless eyes waking Hana from a deep sleep. She bent down to the ground, took the sword in front of the snake, and opened her eyes. The snake rose to its feet and looked Hana straight in the eyes. Hana squeezed the sword in her hand and said:

- *Yes, the lives shown to me in these mirrors are beautiful, but this is not my dream. I have chosen the path of struggle, not wealth. Not for glory and fame, but for conscience and justice. I see this sword in my hand as a means of protection, not for killing myself and others, but for protecting myself. My path is power and honor, not jealousy and violence towards others, -* she said, without taking her eyes off the snake for a second, and took a step forward, - *And you are wrong,* - her voice echoed powerfully, - *you cannot know which of the happy lives you see in these frames are real and which are fake, without seeing the other side of the frame.*

People like you, by showing people the lives of other people in frames more than they really are and hiding it even though they themselves know that it is fake, you ensure that the people who follow these lives feel mentally weak, helpless and useless. Thus, either they will do everything they can to live happily like those in those frames, even if it means losing their humanity, or they will hate themselves until the end of their lives and destroy either others or themselves with this hatred. But all this does not work for me! My life has a meaning, and this meaning cannot be measured by material wealth and temporary pleasures. The things that make my life worthwhile are my decisions, my conscience, and my courage in the face of adversity, - Hana said, turning the sword toward the snake with a swift and decisive movement, - I refuse to believe your lies and delusions.

Realizing that defeat was inevitable, the snake tried to escape, but Hana cut off its head with a swift blow. The snake's dead body turned into dark smoke, and the tense

atmosphere in the chamber disappeared. Hana looked at the sword in her hand, a symbol of her victory over her feelings of envy. She strapped the sword to her waist and tightened it. At that moment, a third door appeared. Hana took a deep breath and walked towards the door.

The Third Door: The Chamber of Sadness

Hana pushed open the door and stepped into a chamber that was very different from the previous ones. This chamber was surrounded by a heavy atmosphere, illuminated only by a small, flickering candle in the middle. As Hana walked towards the candle, she felt the ground covered with soft, fine sand. The walls, barely visible in the gentle light, moved slowly as if they were breathing. The heavy, gloomy atmosphere in the chamber began to oppress Hana's heart. Suddenly, a melancholy voice, as if coming from a deep place, filled the surrounding space:

- *This is the chamber of sorrow, - it said. The weight of sorrow that had come from centuries could be felt in the tone of the voice, - Here the warriors face the sorrows they carry in their hearts. To emerge a victory from this chamber, you must face your sorrow and learn to let it go.*

Although it seemed safer than the other chambers, this chamber was one of the most difficult tests, because it requires great mental strength to overcome the feeling of sadness that oppresses one's heart and soul alone. The candlelight suddenly became bright and long shadows fell all over the chamber. Images began to appear in the sand illuminated by the candle under Hana's feet. Scenes from her past came to life in front of her: her parents' argument in her childhood, the physical and mental violence she had experienced from her own parents, the constant comparison with other children, the feeling of loneliness and unlove... Hana's breath gradually began to fail, her heart began to beat violently. It was as if an invisible hand was strangling her. She

fell to knees and tears began to flow from eyes. She was able to pass through the first door easily, because her heart was pure, her intentions were pure, and although what she saw at the second door wounded her heart, she was able to shake off the feeling of envy from her heart because she knew that all this would not affect her life. But this test... Whatever the reason for her sadness, this feeling that extinguished not only Hana's, but millions of people on earth's love for life, and drove some to suicide... What Hana saw this time was not an illusion. These scenes were real. The truth of the invisible weight that Hana carried in her soul. For this reason alone, this test was one of the most difficult of all the tests she would face. Hana took a deep breath and said:

- Yes, I know this feeling very well. But I also know that at the end of every path I have been sad, I will definitely receive a reward. Sadness is pain, and pain is a lesson. To be a wise person in life, you need to be able to learn from life's experiences. I had ignored the

sorrows in my heart until now and had run away from the lessons that life tried to teach me in the pain I experienced. But I will not run away anymore. Although I cannot make my pain disappear all at once, I must learn to live with them. I embrace and accept all the sadness that hurts me inside, because it is one of the tools that makes me who I am.

Saying these words, Hana closed her eyes and hugged herself with both hands to feel the weight of the sadness inside, then slowly let go of her arms. When she opened her eyes, the chamber began to light up, and she felt the heaviness and suffocation inside her diminish. The flame of the burning candle went out. This was a sign that the test was over. A new door appeared in front of her and began to shine brightly as if it were continuing its path. Hana stood up with relief and wiped the tears from her eyes, despite the pain inside her, she tried to smile, even if with difficulty, accepting the pain she had tried to run away from and ignore, and her soul was freed from the chains that had been holding her inside

for years. Bowing her head in gratitude to this chamber that tested her soul, she silently walked towards the next door.

The Forth Door: The Chamber of Patience

Carrying the strength she had gained from overcoming sadness; Hana reached the fourth door. The door opened silently into a chamber filled with all kinds of clocks. Inside, an infinite number of clocks hung in the air. The chamber was completely silent. There was only one sound that broke the silence: Tick-Tock! Tick-Tock! Tick-Tock! - Although this sound was not noticeable at first, after a while it became unbearable, a sound that reminded one of how time passes by second by second. In the middle of the chamber was a long hourglass as tall as Hana. The sand inside the clock flowed from top to bottom. A person wearing a robe woven with silver and gold threads, representing the transient nature of time, stood next to this hourglass.

This person, known as the Guardian of Time, said in a voice that echoed among the relentless ticking of the clocks around him:

- Welcome, young warrior. This is the chamber of patience, - he began. He then pointed to the hourglass, - Here is a test of patience, a quality that a warrior must possess. You must wait here until the last grain of sand falls from the hourglass. How you endure this wait will reveal your maturity and your control over your patience.

Understanding the new test presented to her, Hana bowed to the Guardian of Time as a sign of her readiness to begin the test. She knelt before the hourglass and watched each grain of sand slowly flow down as a moment of time. The other clocks around her continued their ticking, the symphony of seconds testing her focus and composure. As the minutes turned to hours, Hana's thoughts began to jumble. She thought of her village, her family, and the long test of

time ahead. Doubts crept into her mind, whispering the urgency of her wasted time and duty. But remembering the lessons she had learned from the previous gates, Hana gathered herself, focusing on her breath and the sound of the sand. Each grain was a lesson in patience, a reminder that everything would come true in its own time. *Realizing that impatience would only cause unnecessary conflict in her heart,* Hana accepted the slow flow of time and waited patiently, finding peace in her soul. She realized that each moment of patience was a greater step towards wisdom and inner strength. Finally, the last grain of sand fell, and the Timekeeper bowed to Hana, confirming her victory in the test:

- Well done, young warrior. You have shown great restraint and patience. *Remember, true strength lies not in simply acting quickly, but in waiting patiently and knowing when to act.*

The ticking of the clocks stopped, and silence fell over the chamber, signaling the end of the test. The wall

behind the hourglass parted, revealing the path ahead. Hana stood up calmly and patiently. She bowed respectfully to the Timekeeper, thanking him. Taking each step carefully, measuredly, and decisively, she walked toward the next door.

The Fifth Door: The Chamber of Pride

Hana, who had just learned the value of patience, approached the fifth door. When the door opened, she was greeted not by another closed chamber, but by a view from a high mountain peak. The view was of ruins, with a series of pillars in the middle of the peak, each one taller than the last. In front of the first pillar stood an old but mighty warrior, dressed in faded clothes and with many medals hanging on his chest. This warrior was a visual symbol of pride. He introduced himself as the Guardian of the Chamber of Pride, and said in a haughty voice:

- Welcome, young warrior. This is the chamber of pride, which leads to the path of humility. Here you will be tested by the lure of pride. To overcome the test, you must climb these pillars, which represent each layer of pride you must overcome.

Hana looked at the pillars, their peaks disappearing into the clouds. Although the idea of climbing up was a test, *the real test was to overcome the increasing lure of pride as you climbed higher.* Hana resolutely approached the first pillar. Although the pillar had a difficult surface to climb, when Hana looked closely, she found small handholds and cracks that she could use her fingers and toes to climb. As she climbed, the wind whispered charmingly in her ear about Hana's victories so far. Like anyone who hears praise when she is told that she is the best, most invincible warrior in this world, a smile appeared on Hana's face. She continued to climb higher and higher, influenced by the sudden confidence that came with it. With each pillar she

climbed, it became harder to climb, and the whispers increased:

- Look how high you have climbed, Hana. You are higher than the others now, but you can't stop. You have to be the best; you have to go the highest.

When she reached the last pillar, Hana realized that she had no strength left, and even though she wanted to stop, the whispers did not allow her:

- After coming this far, you will give up on the last step. And what will people think of you? You must be the best! You must do everything perfectly. After all, you are a hero, a warrior. A warrior never gives up a fight, it is an act that does not befit the pride of a warrior.

*After coming this far, Hana could not bring herself to surrender, she closed her eyes and began to think, the victory she had won so far was not only because she was a perfect warrior, but also because of her experiences and failures that taught her to be strong. Even if she was a warrior, she was still a human being after all, **she***

could not risk her life at the cost of destroying herself just so that people would think positively of her.

Wisely accepting the fact that she could not continue, she descended using the top of the pillars she had climbed so far as a staircase. The Guardian of the Chamber of Pride greeted her and said:

- Congratulations, young warrior, you have successfully completed the test.

Hana clenched her fists and bowed her head, saying in a sad voice:

- You are mistaken, dear Guardian, I could not finish the test to the end, I did not have the strength to climb the last pillar, no matter how much my pride did not allow me to surrender, I surrendered, thinking that my survival on this path I had embarked on was more important than reaching the top.

The Guardian answered Hana in a kind voice:

- You won precisely for this reason, young warrior. You chose not to climb to the top with your pride and

die, but to accept your powerlessness with your humility and descend. Humility is such a peak that in order to climb to its highest point, you have to descend to the lowest. It confirms that you have passed the test, I congratulate you, - the Guardian said bowed to her.

At that moment, the wind calmed down and the whispers quieted down. The surrounding landscape changed from ruins to meadows and a new door appeared. Hana's soul became wiser and walked towards the next door.

The Sixth Door: Chamber of Doubt

After leaving the chamber of pride, Hana stood in front of the sixth door, her spirit calm and ready. She pushed open the heavy door and entered a dimly lit chamber. The chamber was filled with fog, the air cold and damp, the sound of dripping water echoing. As her eyes adjusted to the gentle light, Hana felt the presence of numerous shadows moving stealthily around her. A

figure barely visible through the fog, the guardian of the chamber of doubt, spoke in an echoing voice at the same time:

- Welcome to the chamber of doubt, young warrior. Here you must navigate the fog of uncertainty that clouds your mind. You must trust your instincts to find your way and confront the doubts that try to lead you astray.

Hana took a deep breath, bracing herself against the uncertainty. The fog in the chamber made it difficult to see even a few steps away, and whispers from the unseen insidiously filled her ears and from there her mind.

- Are you really ready? Maybe you made a mistake by taking this path? Maybe you don't need to be a warrior? Maybe you don't deserve to be a warrior?

Hana felt the fog trying to confuse her with every step, the path turning unexpectedly, the direction she was heading just as she was getting closer. Despite the whispers, she remembered the lessons she had learned

from past trials, especially the need for inner clarity she had learned in the patience chamber, and the power to trust her own heart in the sorrow chamber. Remembering the old warrior's advice about self-confidence, Hana closed her eyes for a moment, trying to silence the chaos outside and listen only to the voice within. When she opened her eyes, a beam of light shone from between her two eyes, showing her the direction she should go. As Hana moved forward with determination, the fog began to thin out and the whispers faded. With each confident step she took, she made the path clearer and she finally reached the center of the chamber, where there was a single flashlight, casting a faint light throughout the chamber. The guardian of the chamber of suspicion emerged from the fog:

- Well done, young warrior. You managed to trust your inner voice even when external forces clouded your judgment. *This is a skill that will help a warrior survive in the most difficult moments.* I confirm that you have

*passed the test, and I wish you success on your journey,
- he said, bowing and disappeared.*

When the fog had completely cleared, Hana easily found the door that led out of the chamber. She was no longer the person at the beginning of the path. She had no doubt that whatever was behind the next door would defeat her.

The Seventh Door: The Chamber of Fear

Emerging from the Chamber of Doubt with renewed confidence, Hana approached the seventh door. This door opened more easily than the previous one, and led her into a room that was almost blindingly bright. As Hana's eyes adjusted, she saw an arena covered in soft, golden sand, the ground beneath her feet shimmering with intense light. The guard of this room was a fearsome figure dressed in shiny armor that reflected the light almost unbearably. He introduced himself as

the Guardian of the Chamber of Fear, his voice echoing powerfully in the arena.

- Welcome, young warrior. This is the Field of Courage. Here you must face your deepest fears. You must be brave enough to fight and overcome the fears that will come your way in order to continue.

As the guard spoke, the shadows began to merge in the arena, and the many different fears Hana had encountered in her life took on the form of various monsters. The terrifying emotions of rejection, failure, loss, and even death began to come towards her with ground-shaking steps, each one more terrifying than the last. Hana took a deep breath and steadied herself, gripping her sword tightly. The trials she had faced so far had prepared her for this moment, teaching her to trust her strength and abilities with difficulty. She knew that these monsters, while terrifying, were not invincible. Hana screamed with determination and rushed forward, heading for the first terrifying

creature, the monster born from the fear of rejection. Its form became vague, rapidly receding with each blow, using her fears as a weapon against Hana, trying to break her courage. Hana remembered her victories, her victories won with determination, and with one swift, decisive blow, she struck the creature, watching it transform from shadow to light.

*Then Hana faced the **monster of Failure**, much taller than her, trying to crush her with its weight. Hana dodged its blows and returned them with swift, precise blows, each of its blows a reminder of the lessons learned from past mistakes. It roared and shattered this fear as well, transforming into a golden beam of light. Hana faced each fear one by one, her movements becoming more confident, her blows more powerful. Even as the arena echoed with the clash of battle, Hana's sense of power grew beneath the noise. Each fear she defeated made her stronger, her light brighter.*

*In the end, only her enemy, formed from **the fear of death**, remained. As if from the shadows, dressed in a long, black cloak, Hana approached this creature calmly, her heartbeat steady, unlike the others. **She knew well that some battles in this world were not fought for victory over death, but for the right to live fully without the shadow of fear.** Looking into her opponent's eyes with a deep sense of peace and determination, she said:*

*- I am not afraid of you, - she said. Two tears rolled down her cheeks, - **Because I live each day as a warrior with courage and honor, and when my time comes, I will meet you not as an enemy, but as an old friend.***

Hearing these words, her opponent nodded and quietly dispersed. Behind her appeared a path leading to the next door. This place not only tested Hana's courage, but also allowed her to face and conquer her deepest fears, which was one of the most important tests of her journey through the Temple of the Forty Gates.

The Eighth Door: The Chamber of Dreams

Hana approached the eighth door. Her heart was filled with a strange feeling of longing. As the door creaked open, she stepped into a room bathed in an unusually pleasant glow. Moonlight streamed in through the tall, arched windows, illuminating the room. Suddenly, Hana's nose was filled with the delicate scent of roses. Looking around, she saw that the room was surrounded by white roses on all sides. It was like a dream, quiet, peaceful, and beautiful. But there was also a subtle melancholy in the peace here. Hana, paying attention to the pool in the middle of the room, walked towards it, the rippling water reflecting her image to her - *just a girl fighting against the world, always moving forward, but always feeling empty inside.* She knelt down and looked closely at the image in her eyes, and realized that this room was not just about dreams, but also about unfulfilled desires.

Suddenly, a male figure slowly emerged from the mist around the pool. Hana was speechless before his beauty, she looked at him with excitement, oh god, how handsome this young man was! He was very tall, with blond hair shining like golden threads in the moonlight, with ocean blue eyes that were deep and warm, with white skin and a wonderful smile, a handsome boy who would conquer the hearts of anyone who saw him. This boy was a man whom Hana had only seen once before, whose image was engraved in her thoughts, and who had become a symbol of true love that she had dreamed of every day since that day, longed for, but had never been able to experience. The boy approached Hana affectionately, looked into her eyes, and took her hand in his:

- Stay with me, Hana. Leave your struggles, your endless war behind, let it go, let it go. Stay with me forever, I promise you, with me no one will be able to hurt you. You will find eternal peace, love and happiness in my arms, - he said, taking Hana in his arms.

*When Hana felt the warmth from his arms on her cold body, she realized how long she had been alone in life until now. She felt a happiness that she had never experienced before in his arms. Her heart fluttered with happiness like a bird and wanted to fly. She was no longer alone, after all, there was someone who loved her too, and this was the man of her dreams. She raised her head and looked into the boy's blue eyes, oh god, these were the most beautiful blue eyes she had ever seen in her life. Hana almost lost herself in this dream. Everything seemed so real to her. It seemed that this was it, the **hunger for love** that jealousy, power, pride, doubt and fear had failed to capture in her previous trials would seize her soul, take her mind away and imprison her in this room forever. No one could blame her, **many young girls on earth shared the same fate as her, somehow, silently carrying the heavy burden of loneliness in their souls and longing to find love throughout their lives. Although this search sometimes brought them "the one", it ended not in the form of the***

happiness they had dreamed of, but in the form of even heavier loneliness. When Hana held the boy's hand, she felt a great wave of joy inside her. For the first time, she experienced the sweet pleasure of being free from her burdens, of being truly loved, of being happy as a young girl without any sense of responsibility. She hugged the boy, as if she felt that the emptiness that had existed in her heart for a long time was finally filled, she now felt whole. But suddenly a seed of doubt began to grow inside her. She realized that everything was too perfect. It had been too easy. Her heart began to beat rapidly with the realization of reality. She had only seen the man's image once, she didn't know him - his presence in her dreams was just a symbol, a reflection of the love she had longed for but never experienced. Even if the happiness she was experiencing now was perfect, it was just an illusion. She slowly let go of the boy's hand. The boy felt the hesitation in Hana's eyes and said,

- Why are you fighting, Hana? - Even though he was just a dream, there was sincerity in his voice, in his

words, - *You've been fighting for so long, don't you think you deserve to be happy? Don't you think you deserve to be loved? What fool said that the bitter truth is better than a sweet lie?*

Hana's heart was torn between the comfort of her dream and the harshness of reality. She wanted so much to stay in the moment, to give up her warrior spirit, her path, to find, damn it, at least once in her life, the love and peace she longed for. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't fool her mind, because she knew the truth. The dream she was living now was no different from a butterfly's dream, a beautiful, delicate, but short-lived happiness. She hugged the boy and whispered in his ear with a trembling voice:

- I am worthy of love. As a young girl, my one and only desire in this life is to be truly loved by a man and to build my own happy family with the man I love. Now, in your arms, I feel a happiness and peace that I have never known before, it's true, - she said and paused.

As the weight of reality fell upon her, her tone hardened a little. She pulled her head back and looked into the boy's ocean-blue eyes of unparalleled beauty. At that moment, tears welled up in her eyes. With difficulty, she found the strength to continue:

- But this... This is not true. No matter how much I want it to be true, no matter how much I want to live a peaceful life, fighting, helping others, and facing the difficulties of the real world is my current reality. Unfortunately, no matter how peaceful I feel now, I realize that I have a real life and that I must wake up from this dream and move on. I hope that one day we can meet in real life, J....

The boy's face felt compassionate. Sadness was read in his ocean-blue eyes. He leaned down and kissed Hana's forehead and said:

- Maybe one day we will meet in real life, but until then, you must move on. Take good care of yourself...

After saying these words, the boy bowed to Hana and turned into smoke. The white roses around Hana began to fade. Hana fell to her knees trembling, covered her face with both hands and sobbed. She couldn't believe all this had happened to her, what she had been through since yesterday. *As a child, she had looked at married couples and dreamed that when she grew up, she would find her soulmate and start a happy family. Yes, she had already grown up, but in lands she had never known, she was going through unimaginable trials.* Her young soul could no longer bear these spiritual burdens. At that moment, the Guardian of the Chamber of Dream appeared. He leaned towards Hana and stroked her hair, saying:

- *You have made the right choice, young warrior. You understand the value of desires and dreams, but you do not let them cloud your mind and turn you from the path of truth. Although your path is difficult, your spirit is very strong, when the time comes, love will find you.*

Believe in this... *Your work in this room is over. The test behind the next door awaits you.*

Hana found solace in these words that she wiped away her tears. She longed for true love, and she knew that the pain she had endured would be overcome with growth and perseverance. Taking a deep breath, she walked towards the next door without regretting her decision.

The Ninth Door: The Chamber of Hunger

Hana had just emerged from the emotional storm of the eighth door, where she had faced her deepest desires and longings. The presence of the man in her dreams, though fleeting, was so perfect, so comforting. She could still feel the warmth of his arms as she closed the door behind her, but the reality of the path she had taken forced her to refocus. As the imaginary fog of the previous test cleared, Hana prepared for the next test.

The room behind the ninth gate was different from the others. It was a simple room, nothing out of the ordinary. In the middle of the room was a wooden table, on which sat a bowl of rice and a glass of water. Hana's body suddenly began to tremble with hunger. She had not eaten anything since yesterday, and the feeling of hunger had begun to gnaw at her soul in a merciless and demanding way. At that moment, faint whispers began to creep into her mind:

- You are tired, young warrior, you are weak. This food will give you the strength and power you need to keep going.

*Hana's stomach growled and her hands instinctively reached for the food. But something stopped her. This couldn't just be a test of hunger, she thought. **This test was actually a test designed to test her understanding of more than just physical need and to test her ability to control her ego.** As she stood there, caught between hunger and intuition, a faint sound echoed through the*

room—a faint whimper. Hana saw a boy, seven or eight years old, huddled in the corner. His clothes were tattered, his face pale, his eyes sunken with hunger. The child's hands were clasped around his stomach, and his gaze was fixed on the food in front of Hana.

- I'm so hungry, - the child whispered in a weak, shaky voice.

Hana's heart trembled. She knew the pain of hunger eating away at a person, consuming their thoughts, and then attacking them with the desire to eat. Even though her body was aching for food, when she looked into the child's eyes, something woke up deep in her soul - it was her conscience. This room was not just a fight against hunger, but a test that tested a person's soul, mind, and conscience at the same time. *The feeling of hunger was a metaphor, an opportunity for a person to show themselves how much they think of others while focusing only on satisfying their own needs. As Hana stood*

there, she remembered something her father had once told her:

- True power lies not in a person's body, but in their spirit. Although the soul desires to obtain something, reason and conscience know that sometimes it is better to give. On the table in front of Hana was a dish that could easily satisfy her hunger, but what was more difficult was understanding that this test she was on was not just about staying alive, but about learning the meaning of living with purpose and compassion. At this moment, the whispers grew louder, a voice from nowhere said insistently:

- If you don't eat, you won't be able to continue. If you don't think about yourself first, you will fail.

But Hana's gaze never left the child who was looking at her with his large, helpless eyes. This child needed food more than Hana. With a deep sense of enlightenment, she understood the true nature of the

test, took the bowl of rice in her hand, walked towards the boy, and calmly raised his head and said:

- Here, you need this food more than I do.

The little boy looked at her with a sense of disbelief in his large eyes, took the bowl with trembling hands, and slowly began to eat, as if he were eating for the first time in his life, and ate all the rice with such appetite. As the child ate, Hana felt her hunger subside, not because she ate, but because she gave up something she desperately needed to save someone else's life, her soul was filled with spiritual nourishment - *peace of mind*.

The room around her began to change, the gray room brightened, the cracked earth on the floor softened. The child looked at her with gratitude in her eyes and said:

- Thank you, - he whispered and slowly disappeared, leaving Hana alone in the room. Along with the child, the table disappeared, and a new door appeared in its place. At that moment, the guardian of the hunger room appeared and said:

- Congratulations, young warrior, you have successfully passed the test, before you leave here, let me explain to you the true meaning of this test. *Hunger is not just a worldly desire of the body, but also of the soul. This desire manifests itself in many different ways, sometimes in the hunger for power, sometimes in the hunger for wealth, success, love. Some people, trying to satisfy their hunger, do not hesitate to destroy the lives of others in exchange for getting what they want. But this is not right. A true warrior can only truly satisfy his soul by understanding the needs of others and sacrificing his own. True strength is not in getting everything he wants, but in knowing when to give.* I hope you never forget that, and I wish you success, - he said, bowing to Hana and disappeared.

Hana walked towards the new door, ready to fight any difficulties that awaited her with renewed purpose.

Her path was no longer about simply surviving, but about learning to live with compassion, wisdom, and

a heart strong enough to help others in need along the way.

The Tenth Door: The Chamber of Regret

After the deep emotional and spiritual awakening in the Hunger Room, Hana had become more at peace with herself, calm and peaceful. As she approached the tenth door, the atmosphere around her felt somehow stifling, as if the years had weighed down on her. This room was darker than the others. The walls were decorated with mirrors that reflected her every move, but there was something strange about these images. Each image was different from the other. Some reflected her as a child, some as an adult. While her reflection in some images smiled at her with a warm smile, others looked at her with sadness, defeat and anger in their eyes. There was a small chair in the middle of the room, on this chair sat her aged self. Hana began to carefully examine her own old version. The wrinkles around her

eyes, her stooped posture, as if the weight of the world had been carried on her shoulders for a very long time, made this old woman look tired and exhausted. Her gaze was fixed far away, a silent expression of surrender on her face. When Hana approached her, the old woman turned head and met her. Her voice, soft and full of regret, echoed in the room:

- Why are you still fighting? You have lost so much and gained so little. Is all the fighting, all the sacrifices worth it? Look at what you could have had in these mirrors and what you missed by missing out on the opportunity, - she said, pointing to the surrounding mirrors.

The room began to change, the mirrors shining, showing scenes of the different paths in Hana's life. On one side, the family she had, surrounded by her loved ones if she had not chosen to be a warrior, on the other side, it showed her as a wise woman with an ink stain on her hand, trying to study life and teach science, and on the

other, it showed her a simple and quiet life in a small house, without love, hugging her sword. Every scene she saw made her heart ache, showing her how her life could have ended differently if she had made different choices. Her old self leaned closer and whispered in Hana's ear:

- This is what you left behind. And why? A path full of endless struggles, pain. You could have lived love, peace, and happiness, but instead you chose the path of loneliness and struggle, - she said, pointing to the reflection of the two in the mirror standing in the center and saying.

Hana realized the weight of the old woman's words. She began to think. The endless struggles, the sacrifices she had made - were they all worth it? When she could have lived a comfortable and happy life, because of her stubbornness and desire to choose the difficult, maybe she would unknowingly let love and happiness slip away from her life? Although her heart

ached with these thoughts, she continued to stand tall. She had learned a lot on this path she had taken, and although the images of an easier life were attractive, she knew that they were illusions. No one could know what the future would be like in reality except the Almighty Creator. She had no choice but to be strong in life, after all, life had not given her any other choice, and in such a situation, she realized that there was no point in tormenting herself with assumptions and maybes.

- I was forced to choose this path. I knew it would not be easy, I also knew that I would have to make sacrifices. But I did not take this path only for myself, but for lonely and needy souls like me who need help. If I knew when I took my last breath that I could help even one person in this world, my conscience would be at peace and I would leave this world with peace. My strength does not lie in the absence of struggle, but in my refusal to give up regardless of anything.

The old woman whispered sadly:

- But you could have had more.

- No, - Hana interrupted her, - I have everything I need. This path I took made me the person I am now. Every battle, every hardship taught me to be strong, to be persistent, and to never turn my back on others when I see them in need. *Regret is just an illusion, just like my reflection in these mirrors.* No matter what happens in the end, I will not regret the path I took, because this is *MY* path.

As she spoke, the images in the mirror began to fade. The heavy atmosphere in the air and the crushing feeling of regret that had been hurting her heart disappeared. Her old self said:

- You are stronger than me, - she smiled slightly and bowed to her and disappeared.

The Guardian of the Regret Chamber appeared and said:

- *Regret is a feeling so strong that it can consume a person, make him doubt everything he does, every*

decision he makes. But you must understand that it is pointless to live in the past and question yourself about the possibilities of the future. All you can do is live in the present moment and move on with your life, no matter what. You can now move on to the next stage, - she pointed to the door and disappeared.

As Hana stood in the center of the room, the mirrors disappeared and the next door appeared. She walked towards the next door, calm and purposeful, although she did not pass without a fight, knowing that her past had shaped her into the warrior she was meant to be, and confident that the possibilities of her future would not be known until she experienced them. The path of a warrior was one of determination and growth, not regret.

The Fortieth Door:

The Chamber of Self-Recognition

After countless battles, trials, and thirty-nine rooms, Hana had finally reached the final and most important

door. It was the fortieth door. As she reached out to open it, she felt a mixture of anticipation and fear. This was the end of her journey, the final test that would determine her mastery as a warrior. The door creaked open, revealing an eerily empty room. There were no physical enemies waiting for her, or traps to avoid. Instead, a single, enormous mirror stood in the middle of the room. It was a strange mirror, framed in gold and silver, its glittering ornaments cutting off a person's speech. A faintly glowing inscription was engraved on the mirror:

- *Be careful! You are looking at the most dangerous and powerful creature in the world.*

Hana hesitated. Although the words were meant to be a warning, they didn't make sense to her. She had thought it would be a final, difficult battle, perhaps an enemy or some deadly trap where she would test her strength one last time, but there was nothing here but a mirror. She took a quiet step forward. Her eyes teased

her reflection in the mirror. What she saw took her breath away. The young, innocent girl who had set out on this path was no longer there. In her place was a battle-hardened monster, a warrior whose eyes, once shining with innocence, were now shadowed by the weight of everything she had endured. Her body bore the scars of countless battles, and her face was marked with the scars of her struggle. At the same time, a mocking whisper filled the room from everywhere:

- Look at yourself... Look at what you have become... You are no longer that innocent young girl. You are no longer the person you were in the past!

Every sentence she heard tore Hana's heart apart, the bitter truths hitting her like a slap in the face. She had been waiting in this room to be congratulated at the end of her struggle. Instead, all she encountered was criticism and ridicule, harsh, heartbreaking, and heartbreaking. She suddenly realized who this familiar voice from the room belonged to. It was her own inner

voice, and this voice reflected the doubts and fears she had buried deep within her. She looked at her reflection in the mirror with a mixture of anger and sadness, hating the image she saw. For a moment, she felt losing herself, and although she tried to control herself, all her efforts were in vain. She clenched her fists...

- This is not fair at all, - she whispered, - After all... After all, I gave everything. I sacrificed a lot and now I have become an inhuman creature in this mirror? Have I become like THEM? How am I different from the enemies I have encountered?

But then something seemed to move, the wooden medallion she had taken in the first room in her pocket gleamed, reminding why she had set out on this path. Reminding of her goal, her dreams. Every test in the thirty-nine rooms she had gone through had made her the strongest warrior in the world she was now. She had faced enemies, trials, and fears and overcome them all. The scars she bore were not shame, but traces of her

ability to survive. Her struggle had made her the strongest, wisest, and most compassionate warrior in the world. After the memories that ran through her mind, Hana's gaze softened, she looked at her reflection more carefully. For the first time, she saw her true "SELF", not just the warrior, but her soul hidden deep inside. She looked at her reflection in the mirror and smiled.

- I accept myself as I am. My body is just a shell, and the real me is the soul inside this shell. No matter what I look like, no matter what difficulties I have gone through, I am still me. I am that little girl full of love who still has hope inside me. I love her very much. I am proud of her. Not because she is perfect, but because she is "Herself". I promise her and myself that I will protect her, love her, and protect those in need as well, and help them as long as I live and am able.

Saying these words, Hana hugged herself and closed her eyes. She felt the peace that accepting and loving

herself as she was gave her. The feeling of anger and doubt disappeared. She no longer felt disgusted or hated by the image she saw in the mirror. When Hana opened her eyes, her reflection in the mirror smiled at her and bowed down, and the mirror began to blur. Suddenly, there was a loud cracking sound and echo in the room. The huge mirror shattered into pieces, each piece turning into a luminous butterfly and rising into the sky. The room was suddenly filled with great light, and the flying butterflies spoke out and said:

- *YOU DID IT!*

The voices echoed and increased, the butterflies surrounded Hana. These were the voices of the Guardians who followed her on her way and guided her.

- *The most difficult thing in this world, no matter how difficult the path is, despite the struggles, is to love yourself and accept yourself as you are. You have conquered your greatest enemy in this world,*

YOURSELF. May your path be clear,
victorious warrior!

The light grew brighter, filling the entire room with warmth and light. Hana had reached the end of the path, physically strong, mentally wise, and most importantly, the strongest warrior in the world, having found herself and accepted herself. When the lights went out, the gates in front of her swung wide open. The real world appeared. Although the trials of the 40-door temple ended here, Hana smiled, realizing that the real test, the struggle for life, never ends until she takes her last breath. As a master warrior, she had a long life ahead of her, many battles to fight, many people to help, not with weapons, but with the love and wisdom she carried within. Hana stepped out of the gate, ready to embrace the life that awaited her outside the temple. She was no longer just a warrior, but "the Master of Herself" and that was her greatest triumph.

Chapter 7

"A New Life in the Land of the Rising Sun"

Although Almas was accustomed to the luxurious lifestyle of Switzerland, the lifestyle in Japan was on a completely different level. People call America the "New World." If America is a new world, then Japan is a country with a lifestyle so different from all the countries in the world that it can be considered a new planet. Almas left behind the familiar walls of Mrs. Fariza's mansion and began a new chapter in her life in Murayama city, Yamagata Prefecture of Japan, the birthplace of Iaido. Nestled in the heart of Yamagata Prefecture, Murayama City is a serene blend of cultural heritage and natural beauty. Known for its peaceful landscapes, this city is surrounded by lush mountains, sprawling rice fields, and pristine rivers, offering a tranquil escape from the bustle of modern life. It holds a special place in Japanese history as the birthplace of Hayashizaki Jinsuke Shigenobu, the legendary swordsman who founded the techniques that evolved into the martial art of Iaido. Murayama's charm lies not only in its historical significance but also in its dedication to preserving traditional Japanese arts and crafts. Local festivals, such as the vibrant Hanagasa Matsuri, showcase the city's deep connection to its roots, while its quiet temples and shrines provide a glimpse into the spiritual traditions of the region. Visitors can also enjoy Murayama's culinary delights, including fresh produce and locally crafted sake, which reflect the city's strong agricultural foundation. Whether exploring its historical landmarks or simply soaking in the serene countryside, Murayama City invites travelers to connect with the timeless spirit of Japan.

When Almas first set foot in Japan, she was drawn not only to the culture and nature, but also to the essence of the place she would be living in. Her new home was a private ryokan in a quiet village in Murayama. A ryokan is a traditional Japanese inn that offers a culturally immersive experience with features like tatami-matted rooms, futon bedding, communal baths, and local cuisine. Mrs. Fariza had specifically selected and purchased this ryokan so that Almas could live comfortably and peacefully, master Iaido, and experience the beauty of traditional Japanese architecture firsthand. Of course, one could only imagine the wealth she had

spent on this. For Almas, a ryokan was not just a place to stay, but also a reflection of the centuries-old Japanese aesthetic, which is characterized by simplicity, natural materials, and a deep respect for nature. It was also a living example of Japanese architectural philosophy, a haven where the past was seamlessly synthesized with the present, offering opportunities for living, relaxation, and personal development.

The ryokan's architecture is a masterpiece of understated elegance. Tatami mats cover the floors, their faint earthy scent blending harmoniously with the aroma of fresh green tea. Sliding shoji doors allow light to filter in gently, casting delicate patterns that shift with the passing hours. Minimalistic yet thoughtful, the room's furnishings include a low wooden table and cushions, with a futon carefully laid out in the evening for a restful sleep.

The heart of the ryokan experience lies in its attention to detail and respect for tradition. Guests are often treated to a **kaiseki meal**, a meticulously crafted multi-course dinner that celebrates local and seasonal ingredients. Each dish is an artful expression of balance and harmony, served on exquisite ceramics and lacquerware. This ryokan also features **onsen** (hot spring baths), inviting guests to immerse themselves in naturally heated waters believed to have healing properties. These baths, set against picturesque backdrops of mountains and gardens, offer a moment of pure tranquility, washing away the cares of the world.

The interior of a ryokan is a harmonious blend of simplicity and elegance, carefully designed to evoke a sense of peace and connection to nature. Every element within a ryokan is thoughtfully curated to reflect the essence of Japanese culture and aesthetics. Upon entering, guests are greeted by the **genkan**, a small, slightly sunken entryway where shoes are removed and neatly placed. This area often features polished wooden floors and a sense of welcoming calm, sometimes adorned with seasonal flowers or an ornamental scroll. The guest rooms are a sanctuary of minimalism, crafted to create a tranquil atmosphere. Key features include: **Tatami Mats:** Soft, woven straw mats cover the floors, lending a natural scent and texture to the room. **Shoji Screens:** Sliding paper doors allow soft, diffused light to fill the space, creating a serene and calming ambiance. **Futon Bedding:** Instead of Western-style beds, futons are

laid out directly on the tatami mats. During the day, the futons are neatly stored to maximize space. **Tokonoma Alcove:** A decorative recess in the wall, typically showcasing a single piece of art, such as a hanging scroll (kakemono) and a flower arrangement (ikebana), symbolizing the changing seasons. **Low Wooden Furniture:** A small, low table is placed in the center of the room, accompanied by cushions (zabuton) for sitting. An **onsen**, the bathing area is another highlight of its interior: The ryokan offers private onsen for guests, blending luxury with intimacy.

Meals are often served in private or shared dining spaces that mirror the aesthetic of the guest rooms: **Kaiseki Presentation:** Multi-course meals are arranged with an artistic touch, served on traditional ceramics and lacquerware. **Seasonal Decor:** Dining areas are often adorned with seasonal motifs to reflect the time of year.

The ryokan's corridors and common spaces are an extension of its tranquil design: **Natural Materials:** Wooden beams, bamboo accents, and paper lanterns enhance the organic feel. **Gardens:** Many ryokans include a **Japanese garden** visible through large windows or open-air verandas, offering a meditative connection to nature. The interior of a ryokan embodies the Japanese principle of **wabi-sabi**, finding beauty in simplicity and imperfection. It is a space designed to slow time, inviting guests to savor the quiet elegance of every detail.

The garden of the ryokan where Almas stayed was a masterpiece of natural harmony, designed to soothe the soul and inspire quiet contemplation. At its heart was a koi pond, its crystal-clear waters reflecting the dappled sunlight filtering through a canopy of maple and cherry trees. Vibrant koi fish, their scales shimmering in shades of gold, white, and orange, glided gracefully beneath the surface, creating ripples that danced across the pond's edge. Stone lanterns, weathered by time, stood sentinel along the winding gravel paths that meandered through the garden. Moss-covered rocks were carefully arranged to mimic the natural flow of a mountain stream, while small wooden bridges arched elegantly over trickling water features. The sound of flowing water mingled with the rustle of leaves, creating a symphony of nature that enveloped the senses. Delicate flowers added splashes of color to the landscape, from the

pale pink of azaleas to the deep purple of irises. Seasonal blooms ensured the garden's beauty changed throughout the year, offering a new experience with each visit. In the spring, cherry blossoms draped the garden in a cloud of soft pink, while autumn transformed it into a fiery tapestry of red and orange leaves. At one edge of the garden, a small teahouse overlooked the pond. Its wooden structure, simple yet elegant, invited guests to sit and enjoy a cup of matcha while taking in the serene surroundings. The garden was not merely a backdrop but a living, breathing space that connected the ryokan's guests to the rhythms of nature. For Almas, it was a place of quiet reflection, where time seemed to slow, and the beauty of the moment could be fully embraced.

Each day at the ryokan unfolded like a carefully crafted ritual for Almas, a balance of tranquility and connection with nature. Mornings began with the soft light of dawn filtering through the shoji screens, casting warm patterns on the tatami mats. Almas would rise to the gentle sound of birdsong from the garden, a natural symphony that blended seamlessly with the ryokan's serene ambiance. Before breakfast, Almas often took a quiet walk through the garden. The dewy grass and soft gravel paths felt grounding underfoot, while the koi pond sparkled in the early sunlight. Sitting by the pond, Almas would watch the fish glide effortlessly through the water, a moment of meditation that set the tone for the day. Breakfast was a feast for the senses, served in the private dining room of the ryokan. Each dish, from steamed rice and grilled fish to miso soup and pickled vegetables, was arranged with meticulous care, showcasing seasonal flavors. The meal was accompanied by freshly brewed green tea, its delicate aroma filling the air. Mid-mornings were often spent soaking in the ryokan's onsen. The natural hot spring waters, rich in minerals, soothed tired muscles and calmed the mind. With a view of the garden's maple trees swaying gently in the breeze, Almas would let the warmth of the onsen envelop them, feeling a profound connection to the surrounding nature. Afternoons offered time for exploration or quiet reflection. Almas occasionally ventured into the nearby village to visit local artisans or sample traditional sweets. On other days, they stayed at the ryokan, enjoying a book or sketching the garden from the veranda. The tranquil setting inspired creativity and introspection. As evening approached, Almas looked forward to the

kaiseki dinner, a culinary journey through flavors and textures. Each course was a work of art, and the host's explanation of the ingredients and preparation added depth to the experience. The meal was a reminder of the harmony between nature and human artistry. Nights at the ryokan were equally magical. After a final stroll through the softly lit garden, where stone lanterns cast a gentle glow, Almas returned to the room to find the futon prepared. The faint scent of tatami and the distant sound of a flowing stream lulled Almas into a peaceful sleep, bringing the day to a gentle close. Darvish was her loyal companion, as always. Despite being a serious man, his presence was peaceful and reassuring. In the evenings, they would sit on the villa's veranda, drinking matcha, chatting, and watching the fireflies dance in the darkness. For Almas, life at the ryokan was not just a retreat but a rediscovery of balance, a journey into simplicity and mindfulness that lingered long after the stay.

But the main reason for Almas's trip to Japan, of course, was not simply to find peace, but to challenge both physically and emotionally, and to expose her to a revolution. Mrs. Fariza had arranged for one of the most famous masters of the Aido school in Murayama to personally engage with Almas. Iaido [ee-eye-do] (居合道) is a traditional Japanese martial art centered on drawing a sword from its scabbard to gain an advantage in combat. The practice involves defending oneself, maintaining control, or executing precise actions to protect one's life in the most effective way possible. In modern times, Iaido is a vital component of Japanese Budo, serving as a discipline that nurtures both the mind and body. It emphasizes proper technique, form, and personal character development, while also promoting physical qualities such as strength, balance, coordination, and flexibility.

As Iaido involves the use of a weapon, training is based on kata, which are structured forms representing various combat scenarios. Through repeated practice, practitioners refine their skills, learning techniques that are simple, direct, and highly polished. While beginners often display rigidity and lack control, masters perform with a natural, fluid grace that appears effortless. Iaido also integrates a spiritual dimension, as practitioners aim to harmonize their spirit, movements, and sword. This **unity** transforms the sword into a means of personal growth, enabling individuals to

confront and overcome their own inner illusions rather than focusing solely on defeating external opponents. The kanji for Iaido (居合道) translate to "the way of mental presence and harmonious action" or "the way of harmonious being." For beginners training in an official BKA dojo, specific attire is typically required. However, loose everyday clothing may be allowed during initial stages, subject to the dojo leader's approval. Iaido training is conducted barefoot, except in cases where footwear is medically necessary.

Training in Iaido unfolds through distinct yet interconnected stages, each building upon the last. The journey begins with **Keiko**, a phase of practice where the fundamental movements are broken down and perfected through slow, deliberate repetition. Here, the practitioner learns to apply key principles such as **Metsuke** (proper use of the eyes), **Seme** (applying pressure to control the opponent), **Maai** (combat distance), and **Ma** (timing). This meticulous study, which typically spans five years of consistent effort, allows the swordsman to internalize the essence of the techniques and their combat applications. Around the third or fourth year, training transitions into **Tanren**, a rigorous process likened to the forging of a sword blade. With relentless dedication and sweat, the practitioner blends the hard and soft elements of body, mind, and movement, performing kata with uninterrupted flow and the mindset of **Shinken Shobu**—as if in a life-or-death duel. Posture improves, movements become fluid, and timing becomes more natural yet unpredictable, leading to greater confidence and the development of **Kigurai** (demeanor and composure). As this foundation solidifies, training evolves into **Renshu**, a phase focused on refining and polishing both technique and spirit. Here, attention to detail and interpretation fosters a compassionate character, free of arrogance and pride, capable of passing on knowledge with humility. Those who excel at this stage may be awarded the title of *Renshi* by the All Japan Kendo Federation (ZNKR), signifying a practitioner whose performance and character have been thoroughly honed. At advanced levels, movements slow and soften, appearing less forceful yet embodying refined efficiency and precision, with power emerging effortlessly at the decisive moment. With the body relaxed and the mind fully aware, the swordsman transcends these stages, achieving mastery through simplicity and profound understanding.

Only then, as a 7th Dan practitioner, can one attain the title of **Kyoshi**, a teacher grade bestowed by the ZNKR upon those who have fully realized the essence of Iaido through experience and practice.

After mastering the fundamentals of holding and cutting with a sword, beginners are gradually introduced to the twelve kata of the All Japan Kendo Federation. Developed during the 1960s and 1970s, these forms were established as a national, and later international, standard for teaching, grading, and competition. Derived from the most prominent traditional styles (**koryu**), they serve as foundational exercises for preparing students for **koryu** practice. However, these kata remain essential throughout all levels of training, as instructors and sensei use them to demonstrate core principles. Beyond these modern forms, students progress to the classical **koryu** kata, which consist of five sets—three for solo sword drawing (**Iaido**) and two for paired techniques (**kenjutsu**). As students advance, their understanding deepens, and the strict, predefined movements they initially learned give way to greater interpretative freedom. Advanced practitioners begin to visualize **Kasso Teki** (an imagined opponent) acting unpredictably, allowing them to adapt their kata dynamically. Similarly, in the two-person kata, the student (**Shidachi**) must learn to protect weak openings (**Suki**). Any failure to do so is promptly exposed by the teacher (**Uchidachi**), who will deviate from the prescribed movements to highlight vulnerabilities. This process marks the beginning of training to be prepared for any eventuality in Iaido.

Iaido is traditionally practiced wearing a **hakama** (pleated trousers) and a **keiko gi** (training jacket). An **iai obi** (sword belt) is tied under the cords of the **hakama** to secure the sword. The **hakama** is typically black or dark blue, paired with a matching or white **keiko gi**. A white **hakama** may be worn as summer attire, though this is less common. The uniform does not indicate the practitioner's grade. A **zekken** (name tag) is worn on the left chest, displaying the practitioner's name and club or country, especially during international events. Beginners use a **bokuto** (wooden sword), while more experienced practitioners use an **iaito** (blunt alloy practice sword). It's essential to note that bringing a sharp sword to the first lesson is highly discouraged and will not be allowed. The **dojo** should

ideally have a plain wooden floor, free of mats, and enough headroom to accommodate the sword's movement. For individual practice, a squash court can be an excellent alternative. A typical practice session begins with warming up and stretching, followed by opening etiquette, which includes **kamiza ni rei** (bow to the high side), **sensei ni rei** (bow to the teacher), and **to rei** (bow to the sword). This is followed by **suburi** (cutting action practice) and basic techniques (**kihon**), including **chiburi** (blood-shaking action) and **noto** (resheathing the sword). Depending on the size and skill level of the class, students may practice specific techniques derived from the **kata** individually before moving on to **kata** practice itself. During **kata** practice, the teacher may provide instructions to the entire class or specific groups based on grade. Practice may be formal, with everyone following the timing set by the **dojo** leader, or free, where students perform the **kata** at their own pace while the instructor offers individual corrections. The session concludes with a group performance of the finishing etiquette. Each **kata** in Iaido adheres to a fundamental structure composed of four sections: **Nukitsuke** (drawing the sword and making the initial cut), **Kirioroshi** (a main two-handed downward cut), **Chiburi** (shaking off blood), and **Noto** (re-sheathing the sword). Within this framework, there is significant room for variation to suit different combat scenarios. Common variations include striking forward with the sword hilt before drawing, pulling the scabbard back off the blade to immediately thrust backward, or performing cuts at various angles, such as vertically downward or upward. Practitioners may also turn to different directions to engage multiple opponents or reposition the sword for stabbing. In some cases, an initial attack may be deflected instead of performing the standard one-handed cut, followed by a swift two-handed cut to finish. These variations add depth and adaptability to the practice of Iaido, allowing practitioners to prepare for diverse combat situations.

Almas's training began early each morning at the dojo deep in the nearby forest. Surrounded by tall cedar trees, the dojo had been built hundreds of years ago. The air inside was heavy with the memory of history, and the floors had been worn by generations of samurai. Almas took a deep breath and entered. As she walked toward the

dojo, her attention was drawn to the figure standing in the center. Kobayashi Sensei, who was in his 40s, was dressed in a simple but elegant white keikogi and hakama. His posture was calm but commanding. Contrary to Almas's expectations, her teacher was incredibly kind and friendly. Almas was pleasantly surprised by his good nature. Kobayashi Sensei bowed respectfully as Almas approached him. Almas imitated his gesture and bowed even deeper, a sign of respect and willingness to learn.

- Welcome, Almas-san, - Kobayashi Sensei said in a calm but firm voice, - I understand, this is your first experience. You may feel uncertain, but rest assured that Iaido is not just about mastering the sword, but also about mastering yourself. It requires patience, dedication, and most importantly, a pure heart, at least that's what I believe as someone who has devoted years to this art.

Almas nodded as well to her teacher. There was an immediate sense of confidence in Kobayashi Sensei's voice, his aura.

- Now, - he continued, - I will show you the basics of battoho, the art of drawing and striking with the sword. It may seem simple, but what makes it powerful is the sensitivity required. Remember, in Iaido, every movement is purposeful, disciplined, and respectful. - He said this and showed the first kata. He drew his sword in one fluid, graceful motion, then sheathed it with equal grace. Almas was amazed at how easily he sheathed it without looking at it. But she knew that the ease of execution of this movement was based on years of practice and practice.

- Now it's your turn,- Kobayashi Sensei stepped aside and motioned for Almas to try with the wooden sword.

Almas took a deep breath, feeling the weight of the sword in her hands as she tried to imitate Sensei's movement. She saw Kobayashi Sensei looking at her with encouraging, not judgmental eyes that showed support. She carefully drew sword and tried to move, but her movements were hesitant and rough. Kobayashi Sensei stepped forward, his voice soft:

- Relax your shoulders. Strength comes not from strength, but from clarity of intention. Body and mind must move as one.

Almas tried again, this time letting go of her need for perfection. She focused on the movement of sword in the air, its fluidity, and with each attempt he felt her body becoming more attuned to the rhythm of the exercise. As the exercise continued, Kobayashi Sensei made gentle corrections. He adjusted Almas's posture, patiently guided her movements, and in doing so, he never made her feel inadequate.

- You learn quickly, - he said, his tone becoming more sincere, - But remember, mastery takes time. Iaido is not about rushing to a destination at the end of a path, but about walking that path itself.

At the end of the exercise, Almas was enveloped by a sense of calm and accomplishment. Although her muscles ached from the movements her body was not accustomed to, her spirit was light. She could see the long road ahead of her, one that required discipline and determination, but she was prepared to walk it fearlessly, knowing that she had a mentor in Kobayashi Sensei to guide her.

- Thank you very much, Sensei, - Almas said, bowing again. - I look forward to continuing on this path under your guidance.

Kobayashi Sensei smiled a small but sincere smile of approval.

- I believe you have a true warrior's spirit, Almas. I will do my best to help you discover it, - he said, bowing to Almas in return.

As she left the dojo that day, Almas felt that she was on the right path, and returned home with a sense of peace, leaving it to fate to decide what the future would bring.

Although Darvish had always been Almas's protector, Japan had deepened their bond. At first, they had been relatively more intimate, far removed from the responsibilities of Mrs. Fariza's company. Always reserved and relatively quiet, Darvish had gradually opened up during his stay at the ryokan. After first Iaido training, Almas sat on the veranda, her muscles aching and exhausted, when Darvish came over to her and offered a cup of hot green tea. He took his own cup and sat down next to Almas, dangling his feet over the ryokan's low veranda. They sat in silence for a while, listening to the rustling wind through the bamboo.

- I was like you once, - Darvish suddenly broke the silence, - I always pushed myself, I didn't know when to stop. It's good to push yourself, but remember that balance is everything.

Almas nodded gratefully at Darvish's wise advice. At such moments, she understood better the value of Darvish's presence next to her.

As Almas settled into her new life in Japan, she was not only immersed in her training but also in the intricate and profound culture of the country. Every detail of her environment reflected centuries of tradition, wisdom, and an unparalleled attention to beauty, simplicity, and mindfulness. Her surroundings became a constant source of inspiration, and with Darvish by her side, she embarked on a journey through the cultural heart of Japan.

One of Almas's first cultural experiences was the Japanese ***chanoyu***, or tea ceremony. The ritual of preparing and serving tea in Japan was more than just a social occasion; it was an art form, a meditation, and a practice in mindfulness. She was invited to a small, wooden tea house within the gardens of a nearby temple. The room was minimalistic, with tatami mats, shoji screens, and an alcove displaying a single hanging scroll with a brushstroke of ***wabi-sabi***—the beauty of imperfection. A low table sat at the center, and everything in the room seemed perfectly placed with intention. The tea master, dressed in a simple ***kimono***, moved with deliberate grace. Each gesture was slow, thoughtful, and deeply respectful. Almas observed as the tea master whisked the powdered green tea (***matcha***) with a bamboo whisk, pouring hot water carefully, folding the tea cloth, and presenting the tea bowl with both hands. The silence in the room was palpable, broken only by the soft sound of the whisk and the gentle clinking of ceramics. The act of drinking tea became a moment of reflection—an appreciation of the present moment, of simplicity, and of harmony. Almas learned that the tea ceremony was a practice of ***ichigo ichie***—“one time, one meeting.” It reminded her that every encounter, every experience, was unique and unrepeatable. She took a deep breath, savoring the bitter taste of the tea, and found herself fully immersed in the serenity of the ritual.

Almas was soon introduced to another ancient art form—***shodo***, the Japanese practice of calligraphy. In a small studio lit by soft afternoon light, she was taught the delicate art of writing characters with a brush and ink. Her teacher, a master calligrapher, explained that calligraphy was not merely the act of writing, but the expression of one's soul. Each stroke, each line carried meaning and

emotion. The brush, dipped in rich black ink, became an extension of the heart, and the white paper symbolized purity and the infinite potential of the universe. As Almas dipped her brush into the inkstone, she felt the weight of the brush in her hand, the way the ink bled into the paper. Her teacher guided her in practicing simple characters like “peace” (*hei*) and “harmony” (*wa*), each stroke flowing effortlessly from her hand. She learned that *shodo* was about balance, concentration, and letting go of perfection. In every stroke, there was a lesson about life—its beauty, its unpredictability, and its fleeting nature. Darvish, who joined her for this lesson, marveled at the simplicity yet complexity of each character, quietly remarking that art like this was both delicate and profound. Together, they worked in silence, their brushes dancing across the paper in search of mastery, though knowing that mastery itself was elusive.

One of the most soothing experiences Almas encountered was the ritual of bathing in an *onsen*, or hot spring. Japan, being a volcanic country, was rich with natural hot springs, and near their ryokan was a secluded *onsen* hidden in the mountains. The experience of bathing in an *onsen* was steeped in ritual. Before entering the baths, Almas was required to wash herself thoroughly at a station, using small wooden buckets of water to rinse her body. Only once she was fully clean could she enter the hot spring. The bath itself was a natural pool, surrounded by large stones, steam rising into the cool night air. As she soaked in the warm, mineral-rich water, she felt the tension in her muscles melt away. The experience was not just physical but spiritual. It was said that the hot springs had healing properties, and Almas could feel the restorative power of the water seeping into her bones. The *onsen* of the ryokan where Almas lived had 5 pools and a sauna. Almas used the icy “Mizuburo” pool, which was 14-15 degrees Celsius, to cool down body temperature before and after the sauna. She entered the large indoor pool called “Uchiyu”, where she lied down on the “bed” part of the pool and relaxed for a while, then enjoy watching the night panorama from the window while in the water. In warmer weather, she entered the large outdoor pool called “Roten yu”, where she rested her head on the natural stones surrounding the pool. Her favorite pool was the outdoor “Atsu yu”, which was 43 degrees Celsius, and let the hot water wash away all the fatigue from body. Finally, she lied down in

the "Nuru yu", a bath designed for one person, and watched the stars in the sky. Relaxing traditional Japanese music was playing in the background, allowing her to relax spiritually, free from all the worries and thoughts of the day and life. The *onsen* experience reminded Almas of the Japanese concept of **purification**—cleansing not just the body, but the spirit. It was a moment of renewal, a way to let go of the past and face the future with clarity.

As Almas deepened her understanding of Japanese architecture, she knew that it was essential to experience the country's most revered architectural monuments firsthand. Her journey through Japan's temples, castles, and gardens was not just an exploration of the country's history, but an opportunity to see how centuries-old principles of design and construction could inspire her modern architectural vision.

Almas's first stop was Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan, known for its preserved temples and shrines. Standing on the slopes of Mount Otowa, **Kiyomizu-dera Temple** seemed to rise out of the lush greenery, its wooden beams stretching toward the sky. The temple was built without the use of nails, a traditional Japanese construction technique known as **kanawatsugi** that relies on intricate wood joinery to hold the structure together. Walking along the *veranda* that jutted out over the hillside, Almas marveled at the engineering feat. The massive wooden stage, supported by hundreds of wooden pillars, offered a panoramic view of Kyoto, blending the temple seamlessly with the surrounding nature. "*Kiyomizu-dera is a prime example of how Japanese architecture harmonizes with the environment,*" she noted to herself. The temple wasn't designed to dominate the landscape but to exist as part of it. The pillars of the temple were like the trunks of the surrounding trees, and the open-air structure allowed the breeze to flow through, connecting the space to the natural world. She spent hours studying the details, from the way the beams fit perfectly together to the gentle curve of the tiled roof. The design was both functional and poetic—able to withstand earthquakes while remaining a place of spiritual reflection. Almas realized that in Japanese architecture, the beauty and strength of a building lay not in imposing forms but in its ability to embrace nature and create harmony between space and environment.

From Kyoto, Almas traveled to **Nijo Castle**, another example of traditional Japanese design, but this time from the Edo period. Nijo Castle was an opulent structure, built as a residence for the shogun, and it reflected both the power and the refined tastes of the ruling class. As Almas passed through the grand gates and walked along the wide stone paths, she admired the contrast between the imposing exterior walls and the delicate interiors. The **Ninomaru Palace** within the castle grounds was a revelation in design. Sliding paper doors—**fusuma**—divided the rooms, which were decorated with intricate gold leaf paintings of cranes, pine trees, and plum blossoms. These motifs were symbols of longevity, resilience, and renewal, deeply embedded in Japanese culture. Almas was particularly fascinated by the **nightingale floors**—floorboards that chirped like birds when stepped on, designed to alert the inhabitants of intruders. This clever integration of security and design was another example of how Japanese architecture balanced form and function. She walked through the expansive gardens surrounding the castle, admiring the way they echoed the same themes as the architecture itself. Carefully placed rocks, meticulously pruned trees, and ponds reflecting the sky above—all combined to create an atmosphere of serenity. “*This is the essence of Japanese design,*” she thought. “*A perfect balance of nature, security, and aesthetic beauty.*”

Nara, with its ancient temples and roaming deer, was another stop on Almas’s architectural pilgrimage. The Tōdai-ji Temple, home to the largest bronze Buddha statue in the world, stood as a testament to the grandeur of Buddhist architecture in Japan. As Almas approached the Great Buddha Hall, she was struck by the scale of the building. It was one of the largest wooden structures in the world, yet despite its size, it felt connected to the surrounding landscape. The temple’s columns, beams, and roof all followed the curves of nature, creating a sense of flow rather than rigidity. Inside the hall, the immense bronze Buddha gazed serenely over the space. The design of the temple emphasized both the Buddha’s spiritual presence and the natural elements of the world around it. Sunlight streamed through the high windows, illuminating the dark wood and casting gentle shadows that shifted with the passing clouds.

Almas stood at the entrance to Nara Park, her breath catching as she took in the serene beauty of the landscape. The autumn leaves painted the trees in fiery hues of red, orange, and gold, and the soft rustling of the wind seemed to carry whispers of ancient secrets. The air was crisp and cool, and there was an undeniable sense of tranquility that enveloped the park. This was the moment she had been waiting for—a chance to meet the sacred deer of Nara. The deer, known as "shika," were revered in Japanese culture as messengers of the gods. Almas had read about their sacred status and the way they roamed freely among visitors, but seeing them in person felt like stepping into a dream. As she ventured deeper into the park, she spotted her first group of deer. They stood gracefully beneath a cluster of maple trees, their soft brown eyes reflecting a quiet intelligence. One of them, a young doe with delicate white spots on her coat, turned her head and met Almas's gaze. For a moment, it felt as though the doe could see into her very soul. Almas approached slowly, her movements careful and respectful. She held out her hand, and the doe hesitated before stepping forward, her hooves making almost no sound on the soft earth. Almas reached into her pocket and pulled out a senbei cracker she had bought specifically to feed the deer. The doe gently nibbled the cracker from her palm, her warm breath tickling Almas's hand. The **unity** was immediate and profound. It wasn't just an encounter with an animal; it felt like a **unity** with nature itself. As more deer approached, Almas found herself surrounded by the gentle creatures, their presence calming and almost otherworldly. Each deer seemed to have its own personality—some were bold and curious, while others were shy and cautious. Yet, they all exuded an air of quiet dignity. She wandered through the park, feeding crackers to the deer and marveling at their grace. At one point, she knelt down to tie her shoelace, and a particularly cheeky stag took the opportunity to nudge her shoulder with his antlers, as if to remind her that he was still waiting for a treat. Almas laughed, a genuine, carefree laugh that she hadn't felt in a long time. For a moment, all her worries seemed to fade away, replaced by the simple joy of the present. As she explored further, Almas came across a serene clearing where a small Shinto shrine stood. The shrine was surrounded by stone lanterns, their moss-covered surfaces adding to the timeless beauty of the scene. A few deer rested near the shrine, their calm demeanor

blending perfectly with the sacred atmosphere. Almas closed her eyes and took a deep breath, allowing the peace of the moment to wash over her. She thought about the sacredness of these animals, their role as symbols of harmony between humans and nature. In their presence, she felt a deep sense of gratitude—not just for the beauty of Nara, but for the journey that had brought her here. She sat down on a wooden bench near the shrine, watching the deer as they moved gracefully through the clearing. A sense of clarity began to settle in her heart. The deer seemed to embody a kind of wisdom that transcended words, a reminder of the importance of living in harmony with the world around her. As the sun began to set, casting a golden glow over the park, Almas knew this experience would stay with her forever. The sacred deer of Nara had not only given her a glimpse into a world of beauty and tradition but had also reminded her of the simplicity and interconnectedness of life. As she walked back toward the entrance of the park, the sound of the wind through the trees seemed to carry a quiet blessing. And as the deer faded into the distance, Almas felt a renewed sense of purpose, her heart filled with a peaceful resolve. The sacred deer had given her more than a memory—they had given her a moment of pure **unity** to something greater than herself. For Almas, the experience was awe-inspiring. The temple represented the pinnacle of Japanese craftsmanship and architectural mastery, but more than that, it symbolized the spiritual **unity** between humans and the world they inhabited. The building was more than just a place of worship—it was a reminder of the impermanence of life and the need to find peace within the natural order.

Though her primary focus was on structures, Almas knew that Japanese architecture also extended to landscape design. Kenrokuen Garden in Kanazawa was one of the Three Great Gardens of Japan, and it embodied the principles of Japanese landscape architecture. Walking through the garden, Almas was struck by the concept of ***borrowed scenery***—the idea that the surrounding landscape should be integrated into the garden's design. The hills, rivers, and distant mountains became part of the garden itself, creating the illusion that the space extended beyond its physical boundaries. The garden was meticulously planned to offer beauty in every season—plum blossoms in the spring, vibrant green leaves in the summer, fiery red maples in the autumn, and snow-covered

pinetrees in the winter. The placement of every tree, rock, and bridge was deliberate, designed to create a sense of harmony and natural flow. Almas spent hours walking along the winding paths, crossing over arched stone bridges and gazing into the still waters of the ponds. The garden seemed to shift with every step, offering new perspectives and vistas with each turn. *“This is the epitome of Japanese design,”* she thought. *“It’s not about controlling nature, but working with it to create something that feels both intentional and organic.”*

Almas also visited several Shinto shrines, each one showcasing the simplicity and spirituality of Japanese religious architecture. Unlike the grandeur of Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines were often smaller, more humble structures built from natural materials like wood and thatch. Yet their simplicity belied their significance—they were sacred spaces that connected humans to the ***kami*** (god) of nature. Almas had always felt a deep connection to sacred places, where architecture seemed to transcend mere structure and became a vessel for spiritual energy. So when she heard about Izumo Taisha, one of Japan’s most ancient and revered Shinto shrines, she knew it was a place she had to visit.

Izumo Taisha, located in the Shimane Prefecture, was believed to be the dwelling of Okuninushi-no-Mikoto, the god of marriage, good fortune, and nation-building. Unlike many of Japan’s other famous shrines, which were known for their elegant simplicity and delicate beauty, Izumo Taisha had a powerful presence that evoked a sense of timelessness and awe. Almas was intrigued not only by its architectural importance but also by the legends and myths surrounding the shrine. As the car pulled up to the shrine’s entrance, Almas felt a palpable shift in the air. The atmosphere was heavier, imbued with a sense of the sacred, as if the trees themselves whispered ancient secrets. Darvish, her ever-present companion, had accompanied her, standing silently by her side as they approached the grand wooden torii gate that marked the boundary between the ordinary world and the divine realm. Almas paused before stepping through the gate, her heart filled with both reverence and curiosity. She had read about the significance of Izumo Taisha, a place where, according to legend, all of the gods from across Japan gathered annually to discuss the affairs of the world. It was a shrine steeped in history, where the intangible

became tangible, and the presence of the divine could be felt in every beam of wood, every stone pathway, every rustling leaf. Stepping through the gate, Almas was greeted by the sight of the grand main hall of Izumo Taisha. The structure was monumental, with its towering roof and thick wooden beams. It had none of the delicate refinement of Kyoto's temples or shrines, but instead, it stood with a kind of raw, ancient strength. The massive thatched roof, steeply sloped and adorned with **chigi** and **katsuogi** (traditional ornamental elements), gave the shrine a distinctive appearance. The architecture seemed almost primal, as if it had been there since the beginning of time. The shrine was constructed in the **taisha-zukuri** style, one of the oldest styles of Shinto shrine architecture, dating back to before the 8th century. As Almas approached the main building, she marveled at how the shrine blended seamlessly with its natural surroundings. It wasn't just a structure built on sacred ground; it felt as if it had emerged from the earth itself, a natural extension of the landscape. Darvish, who had been respectfully silent during their approach, finally spoke.

- This place feels different from anywhere else we've been, - he said quietly, his eyes scanning the shrine and the forest beyond, - It's like time doesn't exist here.

Almas nodded in agreement. There was a timeless quality to Izumo Taisha, as if it had witnessed countless generations come and go, remaining steadfast in its purpose. She felt a deep respect for the architects and craftsmen who had built this place, not just as a shrine, but as a spiritual sanctuary.

As she and Darvish approached the main hall, they noticed a small wedding ceremony taking place near the sacred **shimenawa**—the thick, twisted rope that symbolized the boundary between the human and spiritual realms. A newly married couple, dressed in traditional **shiromuku** (a white kimono) and **montsuki** (black formal kimono), stood before the shrine, their hands clasped together as the Shinto priest performed the final blessings. The bride's face was radiant with happiness, and the groom gazed at her with pure affection. Their families stood nearby, smiling warmly as they witnessed the union of their loved ones. The scene was intimate, filled with love and promise.

Almas stopped in her tracks, her gaze lingering on the couple. She felt a deep, **familiar ache in her heart—a quiet reminder of the loneliness she had carried for so long. Watching the bride and groom exchange their vows, Almas couldn't help but think of the life she had always dreamed of but never experienced. The idea of being chosen, cherished, and loved by someone seemed distant and unattainable, a dream she had never realized.** A soft sigh escaped her lips, and she turned her gaze away, trying to focus on something else, but the sadness weighed heavily on her chest. She swallowed hard, forcing herself to smile despite the growing melancholy.

Darvish, who had been walking beside her, noticed her shift in mood. His perceptive eyes caught the subtle change in her expression, the sadness she tried to hide. He stepped closer, his voice was gentle yet reassuring:

- Don't be sad, Almas, - Darvish said, his tone carrying a quiet kindness, - When the time comes, you will have your husband as well. Until then, let's focus on your future. You've already come so far. Do you want to come back to Switzerland after all this?

Almas paused, touched by Darvish's attentiveness. He had always been someone who noticed the smallest details, the little things that others might overlook. She appreciated how he was able to understand her feelings without her needing to say anything aloud.

She smiled softly and turned to him.

- Thank you, Darvish. You're the most careful person I've ever met, someone who truly notices everything about a person, especially when they're trying to hide their emotions. It's rare to find someone so observant and considerate.

Almas took a deep breath, considering his question. Her eyes drifted back to the couple for a moment, then she looked around at the shrine, the tall trees, and the distant mountains. Japan had become more than just a place of learning for her—it had become a place of transformation. Every temple, shrine, and monument she visited had opened her eyes to a deeper understanding of architecture, culture, and even herself. She knew, in her heart, that her journey here wasn't over.

- And actually, no, - Almas continued, her voice filled with quiet determination, - After visiting the architectural wonders of Japan, I've realized that I want to stay longer. I want to immerse myself in this world, learn everything I can about the architecture, the philosophy, the culture... all of it. I want to pursue my master's degree here in Japan.

She paused for a moment, then asked the question that had been weighing on her mind.

- Do you think Mrs. Fariza will let me stay longer? Will she allow me to follow this path?

Darvish smiled, his expression one of both understanding and encouragement.

- You've earned her respect, Almas. Mrs. Fariza has always trusted your judgment, and she knows how dedicated you are. If you truly believe that staying in Japan will help you grow—both as an architect and as a leader—I believe she'll support you.

Almas felt a sense of relief wash over her. Darvish's words gave her the reassurance she needed. She knew she had a long road ahead of her, but now, more than ever, she was certain that this was the right path. With a deep breath, she allowed herself to dream of the future, no longer burdened by the loneliness that had weighed her down for so long.

The sound of a soft breeze rustling through the trees brought her back to the present. As she looked around, taking in the peaceful surroundings of Izumo Taisha, Almas smiled to herself. Her journey wasn't over yet—there was still so much more to discover, both in the world around her and within herself.

- Thank you, Darvish, - Almas said once more, her voice steady with conviction. I think it's time to take the next step.

Darvish gazed at her in astonishment for a fleeting moment. Oh God! How strikingly this young girl had begun to mirror Mrs. Fariza! Quickly composing himself, he offered a polite smile, bowing to Almas with the same reverence he typically reserved only for Mrs. Fariza. As they walked together toward the sleek black Audi Q7 waiting ahead, the atmosphere seemed to shift. It was no longer just

a stroll; it felt as though they were stepping toward the unfolding path of a shared destiny.



The Spirit of the Sakura

In a village nestled beneath the shadow of Mount Fuji, there was a legend passed down from generation to generation. It was the tale of a lone samurai warrior and the spirit of the Sakura, a tale of honor, sacrifice, and rebirth. Once, many years ago, there was a young girl named Yuki. She lived in a humble home at the edge of the village with her father, a retired samurai who had once fought bravely in battles to protect the land. Her father, though scarred from war, was a gentle man who taught Yuki the values of courage, patience, and kindness. Though Yuki's life was simple, she carried within her the spirit of a warrior, much like her father. Every spring, the village celebrated the blooming of the Sakura—the cherry blossoms that painted the landscape in soft pinks and whites. The festival was a time of joy, as villagers

gathered to admire the fleeting beauty of the blossoms, knowing that they would soon fall, carried away by the wind. But this year, as the first Sakura bloomed, a shadow fell over the village. Dark clouds gathered over Mount Fuji, and an eerie silence took hold of the land. The people whispered of an ancient curse, one that had not been spoken of for many years. It was said that the spirit of the mountain, angered by the greed and selfishness of mankind, would return when the cherry blossoms first bloomed, bringing destruction to all who lived beneath its gaze. As the villagers grew fearful, Yuki's father gathered the elders and spoke of the legend. Long ago, a warrior had been chosen to climb the sacred mountain and appease the spirit of the Sakura, offering his own life as a sacrifice to save the people. The spirit, touched by the warrior's bravery, granted him eternal peace and allowed the village to flourish. But now, it seemed, the time had come for another sacrifice. Yuki listened from the shadows, her heart pounding. She knew what must be done. That night, as

the village slept, Yuki donned her father's armor, the armor that had protected him in countless battles. She fastened the sword to her side, her heart heavy but resolute. Though she was young, she carried the strength of her ancestors, and she knew that the fate of her village rested on her shoulders. As the first light of dawn touched the horizon, Yuki set off toward the mountain. The path was steep and treacherous, the wind howling around her like a thousand voices whispering secrets of the past. But Yuki did not falter. Her mind was clear, and her heart was steady. After many hours, she reached the summit, where the spirit of the Sakura awaited her. It took the form of a great dragon, its scales shimmering like the petals of the cherry blossom. The dragon's eyes, deep and ancient, bore into Yuki's soul. - Why have you come? - the dragon's voice rumbled like thunder.

Yuki stood tall, though her heart quaked.

- *I have come to offer my life, great spirit, so that my village may be spared.*

The dragon circled her, its presence overwhelming.

- *Many have come before you, seeking to bargain for the lives of their people. Why should I grant your request?*

Yuki met the dragon's gaze, her voice steady.

- *I offer not only my life, but my honor. My heart is pure, and my will unshaken. If my sacrifice can bring peace, then I give it freely.*

The dragon's eyes softened, and for a moment, the air seemed to still.

- *You speak with truth and courage, young one. But know this—true sacrifice is not only about giving up your life. It is about living with purpose, even in the face of hardship. It is about carrying the burdens of others, even when the weight is too much to bear.*

The dragon's words echoed in Yuki's mind, and she felt a new understanding bloom within her.

- Then I will carry the burdens of my people. I will live with honor and protect them, not through death, but through life.

The dragon roared, a sound that shook the very earth beneath Yuki's feet.

- You have passed the test, young warrior. You will not die today, for your spirit has already proven worthy. Go back to your village and know that the Sakura will bloom in peace once more. You have earned the right to protect those you love.

As the dragon's form began to dissolve into the wind, the petals of the cherry blossoms swirled around Yuki, encasing her in a protective embrace. When the wind died down, she stood alone at the peak of Mount Fuji, the sword still at her side, her heart filled with both relief and newfound purpose. Yuki returned to the village a hero, though she spoke little of what had

*happened on the mountain. The people noticed that the dark clouds had lifted, and the cherry blossoms continued to bloom with a gentle beauty. From that day forward, Yuki dedicated her life to protecting the village, living with the honor and strength her father had instilled in her. And every year, as the Sakura bloomed, Yuki would climb the mountain once more, not to offer her life, but to honor the spirit of the Sakura, the great dragon who had taught her the true meaning of sacrifice and courage. In time, Yuki's name became a legend, spoken of in the same breath as the great samurai of old. She lived a long and honorable life, her spirit forever intertwined with the cherry blossoms that graced the village, a symbol of resilience, beauty, and the fleeting nature of life. The tale of Yuki, the warrior of the Sakura, was passed down through generations, a reminder that **true strength lies not in the willingness to die, but in the courage to live with purpose.***

Chapter 8

“Returning Home”

The soft sound of waves gently lapping against the shore echoed in her mind as Almas stood barefoot on the golden sands of a secluded Hawaiian beach. The sun was setting, casting a breathtaking palette of oranges, pinks, and purples across the sky, blending seamlessly into the endless blue of the ocean. The air was warm and fragrant, carrying the sweet scent of tropical flowers and the distant sound of a ukulele playing softly in the background. Everything around her felt dreamlike, yet so incredibly real.

Almas suddenly felt someone holding her hand. *It was him...* He was there again, the man who had become more than just a figure in her dreams. *He was an embodiment of her soul's most tender yearning, a mirror of her unspoken desires.* He stood beneath a golden horizon, where the sun painted the world in hues of hope. *His silhouette was striking—tall and lean, like a tree that had weathered storms but stood proudly, unwavering. His hair, a cascade of platinum gold, shimmered in the light. Around his ears, it was cut shorter, creating sharp edges that contrasted beautifully with the flowing layers that framed his face. It was a style only someone as daring and unconventional as him could pull off. Then there were his eyes. How could anyone describe eyes like his? They weren't just blue—they were infinite. Oceans couldn't match their depth, nor the skies their clarity. They held a profound sadness, as though they had witnessed more than their share of loss, but within them was a resilience so fierce it felt like a quiet rebellion against the world. When those eyes turned soft, though, they spoke a language only hearts could understand.*

And when he smiled—oh, that smile. It wasn't merely a movement of lips under the mustach; it was an invitation to joy itself. His dimples, deep and playful, carved into his cheeks like the marks of a creator who had spent extra time perfecting him. His laughter wasn't just a sound; it was a melody, one that Almas would give anything to hear for the rest of her days.

But he wasn't just beautiful in the ways the world could see. He was beautiful in the ways only those who truly looked could understand. His tattoos, scattered across his arms and neck, were pages of a book he carried on his skin. They spoke of battles fought, lessons learned, and a life lived with no apologies. Yet what moved her most was the way he made her feel. **He wasn't a man who walked through the world unnoticed—no, he was the kind who left traces of himself in every heart he touched.** He had an untamed spirit, a courage to stand out, and a vulnerability that made him all the more extraordinary. **He was a paradox—a boy who carried the weight of a man's grief, a man who smiled with the innocence of a boy.**

Next to her, he walked with quiet confidence. His golden blonde hair caught the fading light, glimmering as though kissed by the sun itself. **He was tall—much taller than her—and she had to tilt her head to look up at him.** His ocean-blue eyes held a serene calmness that made her heart flutter, and whenever their gazes met, his soft, radiant smile sent warmth surging through her entire being. Their hands were clasped together, hers enveloped in his larger, steady grip. **There was 2 years old difference between them.** Almas felt so small next to him, but not in a way that made her feel weak. On the contrary, his height and presence made her feel safe, protected. Walking beside him, she felt as though nothing in the world could harm her. His long strides easily outpaced hers, but he slowed down to match her steps, never letting go of her hand. As they walked, she would occasionally glance up at him, admiring how the firelight from a nearby Hawaiian night show flickered on his face, accentuating the sharp lines of his jaw, the kindness in his eyes, and the easy grace with which he carried himself. **The height difference between them felt endearing—it was a reminder of how different they were, yet how perfectly they seemed to fit together.**

At one point, they stopped near the water's edge, the tide gently sweeping over their feet. The cool water sent a pleasant shiver up Almas's spine, but the warmth from his hand steadied her. He turned toward her, his towering frame casting a long shadow in the twilight, **and she couldn't help but feel her heart skip a beat as he gazed down at her.** She barely reached his chest, but he looked at her as though she was the only person in the world who mattered. She leaned into him, resting her head against his side as they stood

together, watching the waves crash against the shore. His arm wrapped gently around her shoulders, and she felt the reassuring pressure of his hand resting lightly on her back. The difference in their height made her feel even more enveloped by his presence, as though he was sheltering her from everything else. It was the closest thing to peace she had ever known.

As they continued their walk, the soft glow of a bonfire illuminated a gathering near the night show. They stopped for a moment, drawn in by the rhythmic beat of the drums and the graceful movements of the dancers circling the fire. The performers, with their colorful costumes and flower crowns, danced with a fluidity that mimicked the rolling waves, their figures glowing under the flickering firelight. Almas felt the heat of the flames warming her skin, but it was the warmth of his body beside her that truly made her feel alive. She stole another glance up at him—his face illuminated by the firelight, his smile soft, his blue eyes filled with the same quiet joy that was swelling inside her. She couldn't help but smile back, her heart overflowing with a happiness so pure it almost brought tears to her eyes. They stood close to the bonfire, and despite the height difference, his arm still found its way around her waist, pulling her closer to him. Her head barely reached his shoulder, but she felt so perfectly nestled against him that it didn't matter. They watched the night show in silence, their fingers still intertwined, their hearts beating in quiet sync with the rhythm of the drums.

As the performance continued, they wandered away from the crowd, back to the secluded shore where it was just the two of them once again. The night sky stretched above them, a blanket of stars twinkling in the velvety darkness. The moonlight reflected on the calm ocean, turning the water into a shimmering silver path that seemed to lead straight into the horizon. They paused by the water's edge again, and he looked down at her with that same loving smile, his golden hair glowing under the moonlight. The soft sound of the waves, the twinkling of the stars, the warmth of his hand holding hers—it all felt like a dream.

Almas couldn't remember the last time she felt this kind of peace, this kind of contentment. She hadn't expected to find it here, in this dream of a place so far from the life she knew. Yet here she

was, walking hand in hand with someone who made her feel seen, cherished, and loved, despite the towering difference between them.

The height difference felt symbolic in a way—she, the small, quiet architect searching for her place in the world, and he, a towering presence of comfort and strength. But even with the physical gap between them, she felt as though they were equals, drawn together by something deeper than words or gestures. She leaned her head against his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. The difference in their height seemed to melt away in that moment, leaving only the sense of unity between them. ***It didn't matter how tall he was, or how small she felt, because in his arms, she felt like she belonged.***

But as they walked further down the shoreline, the dream began to shift. The stars faded, the sound of the ocean grew distant, and the warmth of his hand began to slip away. Almas clung to the last traces of the dream, savoring the feeling of his presence, knowing that it couldn't last.

And then, with a soft sigh, she awoke. And in that dream, she didn't just see him—***she felt him. She felt the unspoken longing in his gaze, the weight of his loneliness, the fire of his passion. She felt his need to be loved not for what he created, but for the heart that beat behind the walls he had built. And in her silent way, she vowed to be that love, whether he ever knew it or not.***

When the dream faded, she awoke with tears in her eyes. Not tears of sorrow, but tears of love so vast it spilled from her, unable to be contained. This love wasn't bound by logic or reality—it simply was. It existed in her heart, in her soul, in every breath she took. ***It was a feeling of happiness that nothing could compare to or replace.*** Friendship, financial power, fame, knowledge - ***NOTHING COULD REPLACE THIS FEELING!*** And though she didn't know if the man in her dreams would ever know how fiercely he was loved, she whispered into the quiet night:

"If you're out there, know this: You are the most beautiful thing that has ever happened to me. I love you in ways words will never capture. I love you not because I need to, but because my soul chose to."

Almas's mind slowly began to wake her from this imaginary happiness to reality. She slowly opened her eyes and woke up. The gentle morning light filtered through the shoji frames of her room in the ryokan. Her heart was still beating violently. She closed her eyes again for a moment, trying to cling to the remnants of sleep. Although the details of the boy's face had disappeared, she could still feel the emotions - **the happiness of being loved, chosen, and belonging**. But the dream was over. It was time to return to real life. Almas sighed softly and wiped away two tears that had fallen from her eyes.

- ***What if I were truly loved one day in real life?*** - she said to herself.

She sat up in bed and looked around. The familiar tatami mats, the sliding doors, and the peaceful silence of the morning surrounded her. But this time there was something else different in the room. A package measuring about 50 x 70 cm. It was a gift package prepared and presented to Almas by her friends and colleagues at yesterday's farewell party. She took the package in her hand with a smile and slowly opened it. It was a photo collage of her most precious memories from the past seven years in Japan. It was visual evidence of all the stages of development she had completed in Japan. She was breathless when she saw the collection of photos covering her periods of iaido mastery, studentship, and architectural activity. Each photo was a small part of the life she had built here. First, her eyes fell on the photos of Aido. After all, her life in Japan had begun with her first iaido.

The first image showed her at the beginning of her training, standing awkwardly in her *hakama*, gripping the sword with uncertain hands. Her posture was stiff, her expression one of intense concentration mixed with fear of making mistakes. She remembered the feeling of being overwhelmed during those first few weeks—struggling to learn

the precise movements, feeling out of place among her fellow students who seemed to move with grace and fluidity. The weight of the katana had felt unnatural back then, heavy in her inexperienced hands.

In the first year, Almas was overwhelmed. Having arrived in Japan, she found herself in a completely different world, surrounded by the quiet discipline and focus of the *Iaido* dojo. She was introduced to the basics: how to hold the katana, how to stand, how to execute the most fundamental *kata* (forms). It was more difficult than she had imagined. Her body ached from the new, demanding physical positions. The *hakama*, the traditional wide-legged trousers worn in *Iaido*, felt awkward at first, making her feel constricted and clumsy. The first few months were full of mistakes—improper grip, poor posture, missteps during the forms. She often left the dojo frustrated, drenched in sweat and doubting her abilities. Her Sensei, Kobayashi, would gently correct her form, reminding her that patience was key. She was learning to move not just with her body, but with her mind. Almas practiced diligently, returning to the basics over and over again. Slowly, she learned to quiet the noise in her mind, to breathe with intention, and to focus entirely on the present moment. She began to understand that *Iaido* was not about fighting an external opponent, but about overcoming her internal battles—her impatience, her self-doubt, her fears.

But as she swiped through the images, she saw her gradual transformation. In each new picture, her stance became stronger, her gaze more focused. There was one image where she was mid-strike, her sword slicing through the air with power and precision. Her body had become a natural extension of the blade, and her expression was no longer one of doubt, but of quiet confidence.

By the second year, her body had started to adapt to the demands of *Iaido*. She no longer felt clumsy in her *hakama*, and the katana began to feel like an extension of her own arm. Her movements were still not perfect, but they were becoming smoother, more fluid. The basic *kata* she had once struggled with now felt familiar, almost instinctual. Her training intensified as she progressed to more complex *kata*, involving multiple strikes, turns, and re-sheathing of the sword with precision. Kobayashi Sensei emphasized the importance of rhythm and timing—how each movement, from the

drawing of the sword to the final cut, needed to flow seamlessly into the next. Almas learned to move with grace, her strikes becoming more powerful, her body more attuned to the precision required. But the physical development was only part of the transformation. As she trained, she found a quietness within herself. The dojo became a sanctuary—a place where she could leave behind the stresses of her academic and professional life and focus solely on the present moment. Her breathing deepened, her mind quieted, and she began to understand the deeper philosophy of *Iaido*: that true mastery was not just about skill with the sword, but mastery of the self.

She paused at a photo of her and Kobayashi Sensei after an intense practice. She was drenched in sweat, her hair disheveled, but there was a smile on her face—a smile of accomplishment. Her Sensei stood beside her; his usual composed demeanor softened by pride. He had been such a patient teacher, guiding her not only in the art of *Iaido*, but in the deeper philosophy behind it. With each lesson, Almas had learned not only how to control the sword, but how to control her emotions, how to channel her strength with purpose.

In her third year, Almas reached a significant turning point. She participated in her first public demonstration. It was an intimidating experience—standing before an audience, knowing that every mistake would be visible. But as she moved through the *kata*, something shifted. For the first time, she felt completely in sync with her sword, her body, and her mind. She finished the demonstration with a calmness she hadn't felt before. The applause from the audience, and the nod of approval from Kobayashi Sensei, filled her with a quiet sense of accomplishment. This was the year when *Iaido* began to feel less like a practice and more like a way of being. She carried the lessons of the dojo into her everyday life—patience, discipline, and the importance of being fully present in every moment. Her swordsmanship had improved, but more importantly, she had gained a deeper understanding of herself. She was learning to face challenges, both on and off the dojo floor, with the same calm focus.

In another picture, she was dressed in her formal *Iaido* attire, standing tall and poised during her first public demonstration. The memory of that day was still vivid in her mind—the nervousness before stepping onto the dojo floor, the rush of adrenaline as she

began her kata, the calm that washed over her as she moved through each practiced motion. When she had finished, the silence in the room had felt heavy, but in a good way. The approval in her Sensei's eyes had been all the validation she needed. Her *Iaido* journey had not just been about learning the art of the sword—it had been about learning herself. Through countless hours of practice, through moments of frustration and triumph, Almas had discovered a strength she didn't know she possessed. *Iaido* had taught her discipline, focus, and most importantly, peace. The repetitive, meditative nature of the practice had allowed her to confront her own inner struggles, to find balance amidst the chaos of her thoughts.

By the fourth and fifth years, Almas had moved beyond the basics and was now mastering advanced *kata*. Her training had become more rigorous, with longer practice sessions and more demanding physical routines. She practiced multiple times a week, honing her skills with determination. Her strikes were sharper, her movements more precise, and her mental focus stronger than ever. Kobayashi Sensei introduced her to sparring exercises, allowing her to practice in simulated combat. These sessions taught her not only how to anticipate her opponent's movements but also how to react quickly and calmly under pressure. She learned the importance of timing, of striking at the exact right moment, and of maintaining control over her emotions during the heat of battle. Her body had transformed through years of practice—she was stronger, more agile, and more confident in her abilities. But it wasn't just physical; her mind had also become sharper, more focused. She had learned to anticipate, to read her opponent's intentions before they even moved. But the most important lesson she learned during these years was humility. Despite her growing skills, she never allowed herself to become arrogant. *Iaido* had taught her that the journey toward mastery was endless—there was always more to learn, more to improve.

As she looked at the most recent pictures, taken just before her departure from Japan, she marveled at the person she had become. Her posture was now relaxed but powerful, her face serene, her movements fluid and precise. She had grown from the hesitant student who could barely hold a sword to a master who embodied the spirit of the art.

In her sixth year, Almas began to dive deeper into the philosophical aspects of *Iaido*. Kobayashi Sensei would often hold discussions after practice, speaking about the history of the sword, the role of the samurai, and the deeper meaning behind each movement. He explained that *Iaido* was not just about defeating an opponent, but about cultivating a warrior's spirit—a spirit of calm, honor, and integrity. Almas found herself contemplating these teachings even outside the dojo. She realized that *Iaido* was shaping her into more than just a skilled martial artist. It was teaching her how to live. The discipline, the focus, the respect for both life and death—it all resonated deeply with her. She began to see parallels between her training and her work as an architect. Both required precision, attention to detail, and a deep understanding of form and function. Just as she shaped structures with her hands, she was also shaping her inner self with each practice.

Almas swiped through the last few images, feeling a bittersweet sense of pride. She had given her all to this journey, and in return, it had given her a sense of purpose and inner strength. The memories of her *Iaido* training would always stay with her, a reminder of her resilience, her growth, and the peace she had found within herself.

In her final year of training, Almas reached a level of mastery she had once thought impossible. She was no longer the hesitant student, unsure of her every move. She was confident, composed, and skilled. Her *kata* were flawless, her movements smooth and controlled. She had even begun to teach some of the newer students, guiding them with the same patience that Kobayashi Sensei had shown her all those years ago. But even as she achieved this level of skill, she knew that *Iaido* was about more than just mastering the sword. It was about mastering the self. Through years of discipline, she had learned how to remain calm in the face of adversity, how to control her emotions, and how to move through life with grace and intention. She had found peace—not just in her practice, but within herself. Her final test, where she demonstrated her mastery before the entire dojo, was a culmination of everything she had learned. She moved through the *kata* with confidence and grace, each movement a reflection of the journey she had undertaken. When she sheathed her sword for the final time, there was a stillness in the air, a recognition that she had truly become a master of the art.

As Almas prepared to leave Japan and return to Switzerland, she knew that *Iaido* would always be a part of her. It had shaped her in ways she hadn't anticipated, giving her not only strength and skill but also a deeper understanding of herself. It had taught her how to navigate the challenges of life with grace, how to stay centered even in the midst of chaos, and how to carry herself with the quiet confidence of a true warrior. She left the dojo for the last time, bowing deeply to Kobayashi Sensei, who had been her guide throughout these transformative years. The sword she had trained with for so long now felt like a natural part of her. *Iaido* had become a part of her identity, a silent force that would guide her through whatever challenges lay ahead.

Later, Almas looked at a collection of pictures prepared by her university friends. She paused at a photo taken on her very first day at Tokyo University, standing in front of the massive stone gate with nervous excitement evident in her eyes. Almas remembered the mix of fear and thrill that had gripped her as she entered the campus, unsure if she truly belonged in such a prestigious institution. Her clothes, plain and simple compared to the refined fashion of her Japanese classmates, seemed to highlight the fact that she was an outsider—yet she felt a powerful sense of determination to prove to herself that she deserved to be there.

Almas's academic journey in Japan was transformative in every sense, not just in terms of her professional career as an architect, but also as a scholar, thinker, and individual seeking deeper meaning in her work. From her first days as a master's student at Tokyo University to the culmination of her doctoral research, every moment was filled with discovery, challenge, and a deepening understanding of the cultural and spiritual philosophies that underpinned Japanese architecture. Her time in academia laid the foundation for her future as a leader in the field, and it also allowed her to immerse herself in Japan's rich architectural heritage.

There was a picture of her in the architecture studio, surrounded by a maze of sketches, papers, and models. Her hair was tied back in a loose bun, glasses perched on her nose as she bent over a drawing. Those long, late nights working on projects had been exhausting but also exhilarating moments when she lost herself completely in the creative process. It was in those early classes that Almas discovered

her passion for the spiritual symbolism of Japanese architecture. Her professors had pushed her hard, challenging her to think deeply and to consider how architecture could convey a story, a belief, or an emotion.

When Almas was accepted into Tokyo University's architecture program, she knew that she was entering one of the most prestigious institutions in the world. The gravity of that knowledge pushed her to work harder than she ever had before. From the start, the academic environment was both rigorous and deeply intellectual, offering Almas the perfect space to grow as an architect and scholar. The architecture program at Tokyo University combined traditional and modern elements, allowing students to explore a wide range of design philosophies, from the ultra-modern skyscrapers of Tokyo to the minimalist temples hidden away in the forests of Kyoto. Almas was immediately drawn to the spiritual dimension of Japanese architecture. She had always been interested in how buildings could evoke emotions and meaning, but in Japan, she found that architecture was also a means of connecting with something far greater than oneself.

Early on, Almas found her academic passion in the symbolic language of Japanese mausoleum architecture. Her research focused on understanding the spiritual and cultural significance embedded in the design of these sacred structures. She became fascinated the architecture of mausoleums acted as a bridge between the physical world and the spiritual realm, especially in the context of Japanese Shinto and Buddhist beliefs. The symbolic elements in mausoleums—from the placement of the stones to the patterns carved into the wood—became the subject of her research. Almas studied how architectural design was used to honor the dead and **unity** with the divine. Her goal was to understand how every element of a mausoleum had meaning, whether it was the specific flora planted around the site, the torii gates that marked the boundary between the human and divine, or the exact angles of the rooftops, which pointed toward the heavens. Her thesis, *"Meeting the Sacred with Architecture: The Symbolic Language of Japanese Mausoleums,"* became her magnum opus, delving deep into how architecture communicated profound spiritual ideas. She argued that these structures were more than just resting places—they were prayers set in stone, wood, and earth. The mausoleums were sacred

sites where the living could **unity** with the divine and honor the dead in a way that transcended the physical world.

She smiled at the picture of her master's thesis presentation, standing beside a large-scale model of a traditional Japanese mausoleum she had designed. She had poured her heart and soul into that project, delving into the ancient texts and interviewing local monks to understand the sacredness of each architectural detail. The anxiety she had felt that day was almost overwhelming, but the applause from her professors and classmates afterward was a validation she had longed for—a moment when she realized that her work had depth, meaning, and value.

The completion of her master's thesis was a moment of immense pride for Almas. Her professors praised her ability to combine the rigor of architectural analysis with a deep respect for Japanese spiritual practices. But even as she finished her master's, Almas knew she was not done yet. There was still so much more to explore, especially when it came to the relationship between architecture, time, and spirituality. As she transitioned into her doctoral studies, Almas's focus shifted slightly. She wanted to explore how architecture could embody the concept of eternity—how the design of a structure could suggest timelessness and the idea of life beyond death. This led her to her doctoral dissertation, *"Eternal Structures: The Interplay of Time, Space, and Symbolism in Japanese Mausoleum Architecture."* Her research took her to new heights of academic achievement. She became a published scholar, with her articles appearing in top architecture journals. Her presentations at international conferences were met with high praise, and she became known as an expert in the field of sacred architecture.

Pictures of her site visits appeared next—images of her at famous Japanese temples and shrines, sketching the intricate carvings on a wooden gate, or standing in awe beneath the towering roof of a grand mausoleum. Each visit had been a revelation, deepening her understanding of the connection between architecture and spirituality. She could almost feel the chill of the mountain air from a winter visit to a remote shrine, the scent of incense lingering in the air, or the damp earth beneath her feet as she walked the stone paths of a sacred garden. Those were the moments when she felt

most connected to the past, to the spirits who had shaped the land and left their mark on each building.

To carry out her research, Almas made academic trips to many parts of Japan, visiting both famous and lesser-known shrines. Each new visit provided a new clue to the puzzle of the symbolism of the ornaments. She began academic visits at the Tsugaru Tame and Nanbu Toshiyasu mausoleums in Aomori Prefecture in northern Japan, then visited the most famous monuments in Nikko and Yotoku-in mausoleums in Miyagi Prefecture, whose ornaments stand out among all the mausoleums in Japan for their colorful colors and designs. The next destination was the Jisho-in mausoleum in Tokyo and the mausoleums of the famous Sanada clan in Nagano. The last two monuments were the Tokugawa family mausoleum in Wakayama Prefecture and the Koso-ji mausoleum in Kyoto. The academic visit to each monument involved hours of observation, drawing, and translating texts written in ancient Japanese. Almas spent days refining her research, interviewing local priests and Shinto priests to better understand the cultural context of each monument. Excellent command of the Japanese language allowed her to conduct in-depth research, giving her access to knowledge and sources that were often closed to foreign scholars.

Almas's academic success was closely tied to her ability to master the Japanese language. From the beginning, she knew that to truly understand the cultural and philosophical nuances of Japanese architecture, she would need to be fluent in the language. She enrolled in intensive language courses, studying late into the night, determined to gain proficiency not only in conversational Japanese but also in academic Japanese. Her language skills improved rapidly. By the time she entered her last year of doctoral program at Tokyo University, Almas was reading ancient texts on architecture in their original form and conducting interviews with local experts. She could navigate the intricacies of Japanese grammar and vocabulary with ease, and soon, she was giving academic presentations in Japanese, something that earned her immense respect from both her professors and peers.

Almas's academic achievements and research did not go unnoticed. As her work became more widely recognized, she was considered as

a Crown Member of the architectural societies of Japan, a prestigious honor reserved for architects and scholars who had shown great promise in their field. Even though there was no official title as "Crown Member", the candidates for the next vice president of society were called in this way unofficially due to their achievements. Among 45,675 members only 9 persons were considered as Crown Members and Almas was one of them. Almas's candidacy was an unbelievable thing for local members due to her young age and foreign citizenship. On the other hand, this title comes with the responsibility of mentoring younger students and contributing to the architectural community. Almas began to collaborate with some of the best architects in Japan, working on projects that pushed the boundaries of both design and meaning. Through her membership in architectural society, Almas gained access to a network of professionals who were equally passionate about the future of architecture. Her involvement in high-profile projects and her growing influence in the field helped solidify her reputation as a leading scholar and architect, not only in Japan but internationally.

Scrolling further, Almas saw images of herself at various architectural conferences, presenting her research to an international audience. There was a picture of her standing confidently at a podium, mid-speech, discussing her findings on the symbolic language of Japanese mausoleums. She remembered the nervous tremor in her voice that had faded as she saw nods of approval and interest from the audience. Each presentation had been a milestone, each discussion a step toward being recognized as an expert in her field. There were also candid photos of her with other researchers and architects, laughing over tea after intense debates about modern versus traditional design philosophies. Those moments reminded her of the friendships she had formed, the colleagues who had become mentors, and the collaborative spirit that had driven her to challenge her own assumptions and push her boundaries.

The picture of her graduation ceremony brought a lump to her throat. Dressed in a traditional Japanese kimono, Almas stood beneath a canopy of cherry blossoms, her diploma in hand. She had come so far—from the small-town girl who felt out of place among the elite architecture students to a respected researcher who had

carved out a unique space in the academic world. The photo captured a moment of joy and pride, but Almas also remembered the bittersweet sadness that had accompanied it. She had accomplished so much, yet there was no family waiting to celebrate with her. The familiar ache of loneliness had lingered even during that joyous moment, a reminder of the emptiness she often felt despite her success.

A new wave of memories flooded over her as she came to photos from her professional life. There were images of her first official business meetings as the head of the Japanese branch of Mrs. Fariza's company. She was dressed in a tailored suit, her hair sleek and styled, her expression one of confidence—yet she remembered the butterflies that had churned in her stomach that first time she led a meeting in Japanese. Her language skills had been hard-earned, and now, she was not only fluent but commanding respect in a culture that valued precision and tradition. There was a photo of the team celebrating the completion of their first major project—a stunning, minimalist residential complex that seamlessly blended modern architecture with traditional Japanese aesthetics. Almas's smile was radiant, her eyes bright with pride, surrounded by her colleagues who had become more like family over the years.

In parallel with her academic journey, Almas also took on the role of leading the new Japanese branch of Mrs. Fariza's company. Her ability to bridge the gap between traditional Japanese aesthetics and contemporary architectural techniques made her a natural fit for the role. With Darvish's guidance, Almas quickly adapted to the world of business leadership. She led her team with the same focus and dedication she applied to her academic work, ensuring that every project the company took on reflected both innovation and respect for Japanese traditions. The projects under her leadership ranged from residential homes that embraced minimalism to corporate buildings that honored sustainability. Mrs. Fariza's company flourished in Japan under Almas's direction. Clients admired her for her cultural sensitivity and her ability to create architectural designs that not only met their needs but also resonated with the spiritual depth of Japanese philosophy.

As she swiped through the last few pictures, Almas was overwhelmed by how much she had grown. The hesitant, insecure

girl who had arrived in Japan was now a confident, accomplished woman who had not only mastered her field but had also learned to navigate a foreign culture with grace and understanding. But beneath the pride, there was also a sadness—a reminder of the sacrifices she had made, the loneliness that had accompanied her through the years. Despite the accolades, the friendships, and the recognition, there was still a quiet part of her heart that remained unfulfilled—a longing that no amount of success could satisfy. She put down the frame, her eyes misty with emotion. Her journey in Japan had been more than an academic pursuit; it had been a search for meaning, for belonging, and for a deeper connection with herself. She had found strength and resilience she hadn't known she possessed, but she also knew that there was still a part of her story left unwritten. The seven years in Japan had been transformative, but they were not the end of her journey—they were a beginning, a foundation upon which she would build the next chapter of her life. And as she prepared to leave Japan behind, she carried with her not only the skills of a master architect but the wisdom of a soul who had faced her deepest fears and had emerged with a renewed sense of purpose.

After seven transformative years in Japan, Almas had become everything she had set out to be—and more. She had achieved academic excellence, mastered a martial art, and established herself as a leader in the architectural field. She had also grown spiritually, learning to find peace and strength in the stillness of her practice and in the beauty of Japanese architecture. As she prepared to return to Switzerland, Almas knew that the journey ahead would be filled with new challenges and opportunities. Her time in Japan had given her the skills, knowledge, and confidence to face whatever came next, and she was ready for the next chapter of her life.

The sky above Tokyo Narita Airport was painted in shades of pink and gold as the sun began its descent. The glow of the setting sun reflected off the sleek fuselage of the private jet that awaited Almas and Darvish. The atmosphere was filled with a sense of transition—a closing chapter in Japan and the anticipation of a new beginning in Switzerland. As Almas stood on the tarmac, the cool evening breeze carried with it the scent of cherry blossoms from a distant grove. She took a deep breath, trying to calm the mix of emotions

churning inside her. Seven years had passed since she first arrived in Japan, a young woman eager to explore a foreign land, to learn, and to transform herself. Now, she was no longer the same person who had stepped off the plane all those years ago. The weight of her experiences, the knowledge she had gained, and the memories she carried with her were almost tangible.

Darvish, standing quietly beside her, noticed her lingering gaze at the horizon. He, too, had changed over the years. Japan had become a second home for him, and he had watched Almas grow from an enthusiastic student into a confident, skilled leader. He didn't need words to understand what she was feeling at that moment. He simply placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder, a silent gesture of support that conveyed more than words ever could.

- Are you ready? - he asked gently, his voice calm yet firm, just as it had been throughout their journey together.

Almas nodded, her eyes misty with unspoken emotion.

- I think so, - she replied. But even as she said it, she glanced back one last time at the airport entrance, as if hoping to catch a final glimpse of the city she had come to love so dearly.

They boarded the private jet, a symbol of the new life she was returning to. Almas paused for a moment at the top of the stairs, looking out at the Tokyo skyline, the sun now dipping below the horizon. A part of her wished she could stay just a little longer—to breathe in the scent of Japan's ancient temples, to feel the quiet strength of its architecture, to walk once more along the narrow streets lined with cherry blossoms. But she knew that her time here had ended, and it was time to take everything she had learned back to Switzerland. Inside the jet, Almas sank into the plush leather seat by the window. The cabin was elegantly furnished, with dark wood paneling, soft lighting, and a small arrangement of fresh flowers—white orchids, a gift from Kobayashi Sensei as a farewell gesture. She traced her fingers along the petals, feeling a pang of sadness as she remembered her final bow at the dojo, the tearful goodbyes from her fellow students, and the respectful nod from Kobayashi Sensei, who had seen her growth not only as a martial artist but as a person.

Darvish took his seat across from her, giving her a small, understanding smile.

- It's never easy to leave a place that's become part of your soul, - he said, leaning back comfortably, his gaze steady and kind.

Almas looked out the window as the plane began to taxi down the runway. The city lights of Tokyo sparkled in the distance, a million tiny stars in the vast urban sky. Her memories flashed before her eyes—the sleepless nights of studying for her master's degree, the intense focus of her doctoral research, the disciplined training sessions in Iaido that had pushed her to her limits. Each memory was a piece of her journey, a thread woven into the fabric of her soul. As the jet lifted off the ground, leaving the city behind, Almas felt a rush of emotions—pride, sadness, nostalgia, and an undercurrent of excitement for the future. She closed her eyes, letting the gentle hum of the engines soothe her. It was a bittersweet farewell, but she knew it was time to take the next step.

Once they reached cruising altitude, Darvish leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his expression serious yet warm.

- You've done so much here, Almas. You've grown into a leader, a scholar, and a warrior. **But this is just the beginning.** Mrs. Fariza is waiting for you in Switzerland. She has big plans, and she's counting on you.

Almas nodded, her resolve hardening.

- I know, - she replied softly, - I'm ready.

The jet continued its journey westward, crossing the vast expanse of the ocean. The sky outside was a deep blue, gradually fading into the darkness of night. Almas glanced out the window, the stars beginning to peek through the inky blackness. She thought about the journey ahead, about returning to a life of responsibility and leadership. But she also felt a pang of loneliness, an ache she couldn't ignore, despite all her accomplishments.

As if reading her thoughts, Darvish reached across the table between them and took her hand in his.

- You're not alone, Almas, - he said gently, - You have us—Mrs. Fariza, Mariam, Thomas, and me. And now, you have a whole world waiting for you to make your mark.

Almas squeezed his hand, said with full heart:

- Thank you, Darvish. I couldn't have done any of this without you.

He smiled, the lines around his eyes crinkling with genuine affection:

- No, Almas. You did this. You earned every bit of it. I was just here to support you, as I always will.

They sat in silence for a while, watching the stars outside. Almas leaned her head back against the seat, feeling the weight of her journey, both behind her and still to come. She thought about the future, about what lay ahead in Switzerland. She thought about Mrs. Fariza's plans, the new responsibilities she would take on, and the legacy she was about to inherit. But for now, in this moment, she allowed herself to rest. To simply be Almas, a young woman who had faced challenges, conquered her fears, and grown into the person she was meant to become.

The jet soared on through the night, carrying Almas and Darvish back to the place where it had all started, and toward the new chapter that awaited them. As the first light of dawn began to break on the horizon, Almas opened her eyes and took a deep breath.

- ***I'm ready***, - she whispered to herself, a promise to the woman she had become and to the journey that lay ahead. And with that, she turned her gaze forward, toward the rising sun, and the new beginning it promised.



The Tale of the Moonlight Phoenix

In a land where the sun and moon shared equal reign over the sky, there was a legendary phoenix known as Lunaria, the Moonlit Phoenix. Unlike other phoenixes that burned with the fierce light of the sun, Lunaria was born under the silver glow of the moon. Her feathers shimmered like starlight, and her song brought peace to those who heard it. She lived high in the Celestial Mountains, guarding an ancient shrine of wisdom known as the Mirror of Eternity. The Mirror of Eternity was no ordinary mirror. It was said to show one's true self—not as they were, but as they could become. Many brave souls climbed the Celestial Mountains, hoping to find the shrine and look into the mirror, but few made it past the treacherous paths. Even fewer dared to face the reflection that awaited them. Those who failed to accept what they saw

in the mirror were turned to stone, becoming eternal sentinels guarding the shrine. One day, a wandering warrior named Kaida set out to find the Mirror of Eternity. Kaida had spent years training in solitude, mastering the way of the blade and the wisdom of the elements. Her village, once peaceful, had been destroyed by invaders, leaving her as the sole survivor. Though she had become a formidable warrior, her heart carried the weight of sorrow and loneliness. She longed to find purpose beyond the sword, to understand the meaning of her survival. The journey to the shrine was arduous. Kaida faced trials at every turn—fierce storms, wild beasts, and illusions that preyed on her deepest fears. But with each challenge, she remembered the words of her master:

"A true warrior does not fight for glory but for harmony. To conquer the world, you must first conquer yourself."

These words became her guiding star. When Kaida finally reached the shrine, she was met by Lunaria. The phoenix stood tall, her luminous feathers casting a soft glow over the ancient stones.

- Why have you come, seeker?

Lunaria asked, her voice like a song carried by the wind.

- I seek the Mirror of Eternity, - Kaida replied, bowing her head respectfully, - I wish to know my true self and understand my purpose. Lunaria tilted her head, her silver eyes piercing yet gentle.

- The mirror will show you what you must see, not what you wish to see. Are you prepared to face the truth?

Kaida nodded, though her heart trembled.

- I am.

Lunaria led her to the shrine, where the Mirror of Eternity stood in a pool of moonlight. Kaida hesitated before stepping forward, her reflection rippling like water in the polished glass. As she gazed into the mirror,

her image began to change. She saw herself as a young girl, carefree and full of dreams, before the tragedy that had shaped her life. She saw herself as she was now—a hardened warrior, scarred but resolute. And then she saw a vision of herself in the future, standing among a group of people with open smiles and trusting eyes. She was no longer alone. She was a leader, a guide, and a protector. But the mirror also showed her the shadows within her—a figure wielding her sword with anger, driven by vengeance rather than justice. The reflection whispered to her:

- *You are strong, but strength without compassion is destruction. You are wise, kindhearted, but you must keep this sides of your souls until the last breath your life, if you want to become a true leader. It is so hard to keep good heart clear until the end without making it dirty. Wisdom without love is empty. Who will you choose to become?*

Kaida fell to her knees, tears streaming down her face.

- *I have fought so hard to survive, but I have forgotten how to live. I see now that my purpose is not to avenge the past but to protect the future.*

Lunaria watched silently as Kaida rose, her resolve renewed. The phoenix spread her wings, and her voice echoed through the shrine.

- *You have faced the truth of your heart and embraced both its light and shadow. The Mirror of Eternity has deemed you worthy.*

From her chest, Lunaria plucked a single feather, glowing like the moon itself, and presented it to Kaida.

- *This feather is a fragment of my power. With it, you shall illuminate the path for others and guard those who cannot guard themselves. But remember, a leader's true strength lies in humility and kindness.*

Kaida took the feather with reverence, feeling its warmth fill her soul. She bowed deeply.

- *Thank you, Lunaria. I will honor this gift.*

As Kaida descended the mountain, the feather glowed softly, a reminder of her vow. She returned to the world not as a warrior seeking vengeance but as a protector, carrying the wisdom of the Mirror of Eternity and the strength of the Moonlit Phoenix. And so, Kaida's journey became a legend, a tale told to those who sought purpose in their lives. It reminded them that true power lies not in what one can take but in what one can give, and that the greatest battles are fought within the heart.

Chapter 9

“Empress of the Red Dragon”

The wheels of the private jet gently touched down on the Zurich runway, and Almas returned after a seven-year absence. The sky was painted a pale gray that reflected the mixture of feelings in his heart. As the plane moved towards the private terminal, Darvish sat next to her, his calmness reassuring Almas. Thomas was waiting for them at the exit, dressed in a black suit, as always. When he saw Almas descending the stairs of the plane, he walked towards her with his usual friendly and smiling face, a little nervous.

- Welcome, Almas, - he greeted her, with firm voice, but emotional.

He extended his hand to help Almas down the last step of the plane. Almas felt involuntarily happy as soon as he saw the smile on Thomas's face. Thomas bent down slightly and opened the door of the waiting black Audi Q7. After Almas got into the car, Darvish got off the plane. Thomas shook his hand and said:

- Welcome, sir, it's nice to see you again.

Darvish smiled and shook his hand tightly and said:

- Welcome, Thomas. You have become more handsome as you grow older. Mrs. Fariza said that you have never left her alone in my absence. She is very pleased with you.

- You have chosen me for this job, sir. So, I have no choice but to do my best, - he replied. He opened the door and gently leaned forward for Darvish to sit down.

They talked about various topics along the way. Almas, looking out the window at the familiar view and said:

- It has been years since I first traveled this road, - she said in a voice full of nostalgia.

Thomas, looking at her in the rear-view mirror, said with his usual smile:

- Switzerland missed you, Almas. And so did we.

Their conversation flowed naturally, a testament to the bond between them. Thomas told them about the changes that had taken place in the city and in the manor.

- Zurich is livelier than before, but the mansion hasn't changed much in the last seven years. Ever since Mariam heard that Almas was coming back, she's been preparing for this day and hasn't let me sit idle for a minute, - he added with a laugh.

- You can never escape Mariam's hands, - Darvish replied with a faint smile.

- And Mrs. Fariza? - Almas asked quietly.

- She was looking forward to you. Although she didn't tell us openly, you were the only topic of conversation at every dinner.

Then the conversation turned to Almas's life in Japan. Thomas asked her how much of the information she had seen on the Internet so far was true. Finally, he said with admiration:

- Japan sounds incredible.

Almas nodded and smiled slightly.

- My life in Japan was generally very interesting. But I missed us, I missed the simple moments when I felt safe and truly at home in your company.

Thomas looked into her eyes through the mirror:

- We missed you too. Nothing was the same without you.

Almas felt whole for the first time in a long time. She was surrounded by people she trusted wholeheartedly and would stick by her no matter what. As they approached the gate of the mansion, Almas felt a strong surge of emotion. The tall, black, iron gates opened automatically as the car approached, revealing the magnificent mansion she had left behind years ago. Thomas parked the car in front of the entrance and went outside to open the door for Almas and Darvish. Almas got out of the car and took a deep breath, the fresh Swiss air filling her lungs.

- They're waiting for you, Thomas said, nodding toward the front door.

Darvish got out of the car and put his hand on Almas's shoulder and said:

- Let's go, Almas.

At that moment, the front door opened, and behind the luxurious door, Mariam's bright, moon-like shiny

face appeared. Her emerald eyes sparkled with happiness. Behind her, Mrs. Fariza's smiling face appeared.

- Welcome, my dear, - said Mrs. Fariza in a quiet but loving voice.

Almas, her heart beating like a bird with excitement, ran in, kissed Mrs. Fariza's hand and hugged her. At that moment, she had no more doubts. She was at HOME. Mrs. Fariza hugged her tightly and kissed on the forehead. Then Almas' eyes teased Mariam, who was looking at them from the side with her arms crossed and a familiar motherly smile on her lips.

- Almas, - Mariam said quietly, her voice trembling with fragility.

Almas ran to her and hugged her tightly. Mariam's arms wrapped around her with the same tenderness as years ago, as if time had never passed.

- I missed you so much, Mariam, - Almas whispered, tears welling up in her eyes.

Mariam gently stroked Almas's hair, the look in her emerald eyes filling Almas's heart with love and compassion.

- I missed you too, my little Almas. This house was so empty without your smile, - she said and stepped back. She looked at Almas with her eyes, - I call you little, but you have already become a charming young lady. Despite this, you are still my little Almas, - she said and hugged her again.

Almas held Mariam's hands and smiled, wiping away her tears.

- It's nice to be home.

Darvish, who had been watching them for a few steps, coughed quietly and caught Mariam's attention. Mariam looked at her and smiled warmly.

- Darvish, thank you very much for taking good care of Almas. And you are welcome, - she added.

Darvish nodded respectfully and said to her:

- It was my duty, Mariam - he said.

After Thomas carried the luggage inside, Mrs. Fariza turned to the household and clapped her hands:

- We will all have dinner together tonight. Everyone, wash your hands and sit down at the table quickly. Mariam, you start serving, - she said.

Hearing the wonderful voice full of kindness, the household immediately acted. Almas went to her room; Thomas helped her carry the suitcases. Mariam immediately went to the kitchen and prepared for the service with pomp. Darvish and Mrs. Fariza went into the study before eating. Mrs. Fariza went inside and went to the chair in front of the stove and sat down quietly. Darvish stood before her, as always, ready like a soldier waiting for her command at any moment. Mrs. Fariza motioned for him to sit in the chair opposite her. Darvish bowed and sat down. There was a moment of silence between them. Mrs. Fariza's eyes stared at the fire in the stove for a moment.

- She has changed, - Mrs. Fariza said in a low but restrained voice, - Japan has transformed her from the naive girl who came to this house years ago into a wise young lady, - she added.

Darvish nodded, Mrs. Fariza leaned back and breathed lightly.

- And she must continue to study. She will need you more than ever in the future.

Darvish's expression became serious:

- I promise. I will show her the path she needs under your guidance and never leave her alone.

A faint smile appeared on Mrs. Fariza's lips, which was a very rare occurrence:

- You have always been my most loyal confidant, Darvish. Just as I entrusted my life to you, I also entrust Almas's life to you, - she said, her voice becoming even more reserved, - I cannot ignore the flow of

time, Darvish. I see it every morning in the lines on my face, in the pains that remind me of it. This house, everything - it is not in my power to own them forever. Soon, all of this will be Almas's.

Darvish's eyebrows furrowed slightly.

- You talk as if you have no time left to live, Mrs. Fariza, what is bothering you? - he asked.

Mrs. Fariza, avoiding his question, waved her hand indifferently and said:

- Time is a luxury for me that I can waste. Almas is ready, but *she must believe it herself*. I ask you to show her that *she is ready*, and that you will lead her in my absence.

Darvish did not ask any further questions on the subject, but his concern was clear. Instead, he nodded and said:

- She has the utmost respect for you. Your trust will give her the strength to take on her role. And, as always, I will be there to support Almas.

Mrs. Fariza rested her elbows on the arms of chair and her gaze became serious.

- Almas *must never doubt herself*, Darvish. Not for a moment. There is no room for hesitation or weakness in the events that await and in the *New World* she is about to enter. If she stumbles for a moment, whole world could come crashing down on her.

- I understand, - Darvish replied firmly, - but she is very strong, and for that she owes you.

Mrs. Fariza's expression softened again; her thoughts were far away now.

- She reminded me of Ela, at first. The same whimsy, the same joy of life. Maybe that's why I had a different connection with her, not only as an employee or a student. But she proved herself over time. She was my second chance at life. I no longer see her as replace of my daughter, but I love her as my second daughter. I couldn't protect Ela, if necessary, to protect Almas, *I would tear this world down and rebuild it...*

Darvish fell silent, understanding the weight of these words. He knew how sensitive and difficult it was for Fariza to talk about Ela.

- Enough of this sentimentality, - said Mrs. Fariza and stood up. Although her tone of voice had regained its sharpness, her gaze was thoughtful, - Dinner will be served soon. Let's not keep the others waiting, - she said and sat down behind her desk.

Darvish immediately stood up, bowed to her, and prepared to leave the room. Just as he was about to leave, Mrs. Fariza's voice was heard from behind him.

- Darvish, - she called out.

Darvish turned and looked at her.

- Thank you, - she said, - for everything.

A rare moment of intimacy passed between them before Darvish nodded and left the room, leaving Mrs. Fariza alone in the room. She sat there for a moment, staring out the window at the darkening sky, as if searching for answers there. She finally got up from the table and joined the household, who were waiting for her arrival to begin dinner.

The dining room was illuminated by the soft glow of the chandelier, giving the table a warm atmosphere. Polished silverware gleamed, and the aroma of roast lamb, freshly baked bread, and rich soup filled the air. Everyone was now gathered around the large table, a symbol of unity and tradition in the manor. Almas sat between Mary and Thomas. The sincerity with which Thomas had spread as he recounted the events in Switzerland in Almas's absence brought a smile to Almas's face. Across from Almas, Mrs. Fariza sat on the other side of the table, her sharp eyes following every movement, her lips curling in a faint smile at the reunion of her family—*her chosen family*. After the initial conversation was over, Mrs. Fariza slowly put her fork down on her plate and turned her attention to Almas.

- So, my dear, - she began in a commanding but caring tone, - you have spent seven years developing your knowledge and skills in Japan. What are your plans now that you have returned to Switzerland? - she asked.

Almas sat forward at this question, a tense expression on her face under Mrs. Fariza's gaze. But she took a deep breath and began to speak calmly. She knew that Mrs. Fariza was asking this question to support her, as she always did.

- I have thought about this a lot, Mrs. Fariza. The discipline and philosophy of Iaido have become an integral part of my life over these seven years and have helped me a lot to shape me as a person. I believe that it can also be of help to others. That is why I want to open my first Iaido school here, in Zurich.

A wave of curiosity spread around the table after Almas said this idea. Mariam smiled warmly. She was clearly proud of Almas's determination about her future plans and the confidence she showed in her speech. Thomas nodded in agreement, his eyes filled with admiration.

Almas continued, her voice gradually becoming more steady:

- In addition, I want to pursue an academic career, to start working as an assistant professor at a university with an architecture department. Science has always been a dream of mine, and I want to train young scholars by sharing what I have learned, especially about Japanese architecture and symbolic language, - she said, pausing to look at Darvish.

Darvish smiled slightly, as if he knew what she was going to say, and nodded in agreement. Almas looked back at Mrs. Fariza and said:

- And of course, I will continue to dedicate myself to your company. I will do my best to make a contribution in Switzerland, while ensuring that the Japanese branch remains strong, - she concluded her thought.

The room fell silent as everyone waited for Mrs. Fariza's reaction. For a moment, the expression on her face was incomprehensible, her sharp eyes fixed on Almas, as if she were weighing every thought she had said in her mind. Finally, a rare, genuine smile appeared on her lips, softening her hardness. Leaning back in chair, she clasped her hands together and said:

- You have thought through your future plans very carefully, Almas. I admire your desire to pursue three such different goals at the same

time. Your plans are ambitious, but balanced, which is proof that you have grown and matured.

Almas's heart turned to the mountains at the sight of Mrs. Fariza's praise. She turned her gaze to Darvish, her eyes wide with excitement and joy. Before Almas could answer, Mrs. Fariza turned her gaze to Darvish:

- All necessary preparations for Almas's plans should begin immediately. Contact the best real estate agents in Zurich for the Iaido school. Do not rent the place, buy it outright, with Almas's approval. Once the location is confirmed, give the real estate agent a open check in my name. Tell them that the amount is not important. All the references Almas needs for her academic career will be obtained from her professors in Japan. I will personally arrange for these references to be delivered to the necessary places. In the meantime, you will also make sure that Almas returns to the company as necessary, - she said.

Darvish nodded in agreement:

- You can consider all your tasks as have already completed, Mrs. Fariza, - he said respectfully.

Thomas leaned forward a little, a joking smile on his lips:

- Iaido school in Zurich, huh? I can already see that you will be a sensation in the headlines of the Swiss media, Almas. When you are a famous martial artist, professor and businesswoman, you probably forget about us, ordinary people, - he laughed.

A light laugh broke out at the table, the serious atmosphere just now lightened. Almas smiled and said shyly:

- I don't think it will happen, Thomas, but thank you for believing in my future.

Mariam reached out and gently stroked Almas's hand:

- You've come a long way, my dear. I have no doubt that you will achieve everything you set your mind to.

The rest of the dinner was spent in heartfelt conversations and toasts to the future. Almas couldn't help but feel so confident, surrounded by people who believed in her. For the first time in a long

time, she not only felt hopeful, but also convinced that *her dreams could come true*.

The next week, in the morning the mansion woke to the soft glow of the Zurich sun filtering through the windows, casting a warm golden light over the classically designed interior. The scent of freshly brewed coffee and baked croissants wafted through the air. Almas, dressed in a simple but elegant dress, entered the dining room, which was lit by the sunlight streaming through the panoramic windows and overlooking the magnificent garden. Her face bore the calm determination of someone eager to move forward. When Mariam entered the room, she greeted her with her usual innocent smile. Mariam smiled back at her with her usual motherly caress, and, setting a cup of coffee in front of her, said:

- Good morning, Almas. I have prepared your favorite gingerbread cookies, - she said, setting the cookies aside.

- Really?! - Almas said, reaching for the cookies with childish whimsy.

Mariam stepped forward quickly:

- Breakfast first, young lady! If you don't finish all food, you won't get any cookies! - she said with expression slightly hardening with a hint of humor.

Almas whimpered and stepped back. After the long and lonely years spent in Japan, the child inside her was in dire need of someone to caress. At that moment, Mrs. Fariza entered the room and said:

- Well, I see, nothing has changed! The spoiled Miss Almas and her patient nanny are back at work, - she said to them with a kind sneer and sat down. Her black suit had a perfect design that reflected her authority and elegance. Then Thomas and Darvish entered the room and sat down at the table. Darvish had brought a bunch of roses that he had once planted from the garden, put them in a vase and placed them on the table, and the whole room was filled with the fragrance of delicate white roses. It was Mrs. Fariza's favorite flower. She nodded her approval to Darvish for this kind gesture and smiled slightly. Mariam brought the last plate and sat down at the table herself too. Breakfast passed quietly but peacefully. Their sincere conversations alternated. From Mariam's stories of small accidents

in the kitchen to Thomas's joke about how Almas had been unable to get used to Swiss flour products after spending years in Japan, the conversations flowed naturally. Even Darvish joined them and shared stories about the cultural differences he had encountered in Japan. As the plates were cleared and the last cups of coffee were sipped, Mrs. Fariza placed her hands on the table, addressed everyone with her gaze, and said, steadying her tone:

- You have a very busy day ahead of you. Each of you has important tasks and I have no doubt that you will fulfill them perfectly, I have infinite confidence in all of you, - she said, turning first to Darvish, - I know that you will meet with real estate agents today, I want a complete report from you by evening on potential properties for Almas's Iaido school, - she said.

- Well noted, Ma`am, - Darvish replied, bowing to her. He had already organized his daily work schedule in his mind.

Then Mrs. Fariza turned her attention to Almas and Mariam:

- Almas, you and Mariam will meet with graphic and fashion designers for the design concept of the Iaido school. No one can explain to the designer better than you what the school's emblem will be, what it will represent. Mariam, and you, with your exquisite taste, will direct the design of the student uniforms in the most magnificent way, - she said.

- Of course, - Almas answered in a voice full of gratitude.

Mariam bowed her head respectfully and replied:

- I would be very happy to be a part of Almas's dreams coming true.

Finally, she turned to Thomas:

- Thomas, you will take these two ladies everywhere they go today and accompany them to ensure that they have everything they need along the way.

Thomas smiled and said:

- Don't worry, Madam, I will ensure their safety and be with them wherever they go.

Having completed her instructions, Mrs. Fariza slightly raised her left hand in the air, giving them permission to go. Finally, to Darvish:

- I called the company early in the morning and asked them to send a separate car for you from the company's garage. The destinations you will be going to today are very different. Since we will have a more active lifestyle from now on, we will all need separate cars. However, I don't feel the need to hire another driver yet. You know best that I do not easily accept strangers into my private space. You will talk to Thomas in the evening and accompany me during the day, one of you and Almas. Now you can go too, - she said.

Everyone got up from the table and the atmosphere of the room became lively. Thomas went to the garage to prepare the car, and Mariam went to her room to get her bag. Almas hesitated a little and said to Mrs. Fariza shyly:

- Thank you very much, Mrs. Fariza, - for everything.

Mrs. Fariza's gaze softened for a moment.

- You deserve it, Almas. *Now go and make your dreams come true.*

The black Audi Q7, gleaming in the sunlight, soon set off. As the car sped away, heading towards the bustling streets of Zurich, Almas looked out the window, her heart filled with hope, excitement, and determination. Today was just the beginning of her plans, but she knew it was a step in the right direction. Sitting in the back seat, Mariam told Almas about her youth stories, making Almas laugh. Thomas's occasional jokes added sweetness to the conversation, making Almas feel the happiness of support and love. Thus they reached their destination and entered the spacious, bright studio of Zurich's most famous design firm. The walls were decorated with creative drawings, fabric samples, and digital screens displaying fashion concepts in vibrant colors.

Lucas, a graphic designer in his 30s, dressed neatly and stylishly, with a friendly and enthusiastic appearance, greeted them at the door. Next to him stood Clara, an elegant woman known for her avant-garde yet practical designs, a fashion designer. Both of them were ready with a single phone call from Mrs. Fariza, they had put aside all their work and prepared themselves for this task.

- Welcome, Miss Almas and Miss Mariam, - Lucas greeted them with a professional smile, - It is an honor for us to work on such an interesting project as yours.

Clara gestured to a table with sketches and fabric samples and said:

- Come here, please. We have prepared some initial concepts for you to review.

After they were seated, Lucas began to explain the initial ideas for the branding:

- For your Iaido school, we wanted to combine traditional Japanese aesthetics with a modern and elegant feel. Here are some logo and name options that you brainstormed.

Almas looked at each of the intricate designs with her sharp eyes. While each one was beautiful on its own, it felt like something was missing.

- These are magnificent, - Almas said thoughtfully.

- But I think the name and concept should have a deeper meaning. It should be something that represents strength, will, and a spirit of helping others.

Mariam, who had been quietly observing, said:

- Almas has always been inspired by stories and symbols. Maybe there is something from your past or your life in Japan that you can draw inspiration from, Almas?

Almas's eyes lit up as soon as she heard Mariam's idea. She no longer had the slightest doubt. She remembered the book "The Legend of the Red Dragon" that she had found in Mrs. Fariza's library and read many years ago.

- I have an idea. The school should be called the Red Dragon Society. This is inspired by a story I read many years ago about a dragon that became a symbol of hope and strength for a young warrior. The power of the dragon was not only physical, but also to inspire others and protect those who could not protect themselves. I want my school to represent the symbol of that dragon.

Lucas and Clara looked at each other, their expressions clearly affected.

- This is a very powerful idea, - Clara said, - The name has a lot of weight and the symbolism is incredible. We can design uniforms, logos, and branding around the red dragon theme.

Lucas nodded in agreement:

- It's unique, memorable, and has a deep meaning. Let me show you how I can visualize it, - he said, opening a digital drawing on his tablet and creating a logo of a dragon holding a sword in its paw, with traditional Japanese ornaments and red roses around it.

Almas felt a surge of excitement and strength rise inside her as she watched the idea take shape.

Clara turned the conversation to uniforms:

- I suggest that the students keep the traditional Iaido uniform, but add subtle, red accents, and perhaps a red dragon emblem on the sleeves and belt. This would honor the martial arts traditions while also signaling the school's identity.

Almas nodded:

- I want the uniform to reflect discipline and humility, but also the pride that comes from being part of a greater force.

Clara showed me a few fabric samples in shades of black, white, and red.

- I can design a prototype for you to review. We will use the highest quality materials to ensure that the students feel both comfortable and confident during production.

As the meeting continued, Almas thought about how far she had come. The name "Red Dragon Society" was like a bridge between her past and future, a life story that had shaped her, and a way to honorably carry out the mission that lay ahead. Seeing the thoughtful expression on Almas' face, Mariam reached out and took her hand and said:

- This will be something extraordinary, Almas. *You will create* not just a martial arts school, *but a cultural legacy.*

Hearing these words, Almas's heart overflowed with gratitude and determination, she said:

- It's not just about me, it's about the Red Dragon giving people a place in the story where they can grow and learn and become stronger.

At the end of the meeting, the name of the "Red Dragon Society" was finalized, and initial designs for the logo, uniforms, and branding were approved. As Almas and Mariam prepared to leave, Clara promised them that prototypes would be ready in a few weeks. They shook hands and left the studio, spending the rest of the day chatting and enjoying the view of Zurich.

At that time Mrs. Fariza was sitting behind a magnificent mahogany desk in the dimly lit interior of the mansion's study, her silhouette reflected on the wall by the light of the fire burning in the marble hearth. The atmosphere of the room was very heavy, this room, usually animated by the presence of close people she trusted, now reigned an eerie silence, this silence was broken only by the ticking of the clock and the sound of burning firewood from the hearth. She had her eyes fixed on a cup of jasmine tea in front of her, lost in thought. This was a special moment that no one but herself would witness. Suddenly, the creak of the main entrance door, which she had deliberately left open, was heard. This was evidence that the guest she was waiting for had entered the mansion. The faint sounds of approaching footsteps on the polished floors broke the silence. Then there was a gentle knock on the study door. Mrs. Fariza, without raising her head, said in a quiet but formidable voice:

- Come in.

A man entered, his features indistinguishable in the dim light of the room. He was impeccably dressed, modest but purposeful like a shadow. He continued his steps and stopped when he reached Mrs. Fariza's table. Keeping his distance, he stepped in front of her and stood respectfully. Mrs. Fariza raised her left hand slightly, motioning for him to sit down and fixed gaze on the fire in the fireplace. The man sat down hesitantly, placing his hands on knees. Neither of them could begin a conversation. The man lowered his head as if he were guilty and looked down at his hands. There was a look of fear and expressionless sadness on his face. Mrs. Fariza turned her gaze to him and remained motionless for a few moments, trying to read the meaning of the features on his face. Finally, breaking the silence, she asked in a voice as hard as steel but calm.

- How much time do we have?

Although the man hesitated to answer, he finally gathered his courage and said, choosing his words carefully:

- A year at best chance. Under the best care and supervision, of course. But I must say with regret that this year will not be easy.

Mrs. Fariza pressed her lips into a thin line. Her delicately ringed hands lay motionless on the table. Her gaze was fixed on the fire in the hearth as if drawing strength from their wild, unyielding dance.

- A year, - she said quietly to herself, - a year in which everything must come to pass as it should.

The man leaned forward a little. In a tone of concern, he said:

- I assure you that I will do everything in my power to make this time as painless as possible. But still, I am very worried about you, madam.

As soon as Mrs. Fariza heard these words, as if she had woken up from a deep sleep, she fixed her sharp and cruel gaze on the man's eyes. In a tone of voice as sharp as lightning, she said:

- It is not your business to take care of me! Your business is to make sure that no one outside this room knows about this. Do you understand this?!

The man's tongue was stuck in Mrs. Fariza's fear and he said:

- Of course, ma'am. Confidentiality is not even a subject of discussion in this matter...

As soon as she heard this, Mrs. Fariza leaned back, her gaze fixed on the burning hearth again. The man realized that his presence was no longer needed here and stood up. He said cautiously:

- If there is anything else I can do...

- You may go, Mrs. Fariza interrupted him, raising her hand to give him permission to leave.

The man bowed his head slightly and retreated towards the door. He closed the door quietly behind him. The room fell silent again. Mrs. Fariza's face was illuminated by the light from the fire. For a brief moment, her composure was shaken, her shoulders slumped under the weight of the truth she carried. Her eyes sparkled with sadness,

but no tears fell. Instead, she straightened her body, a sense of determination took possession of her soul.

- One year, she whispered, - it is enough.

The sun was shining golden over Zurich as Darvish drove through the bustling streets to meet the real estate agents. Darvish's thoughts were focused, the details and features of Almas's Iaido school running through his mind. But as he reached into briefcase to review notes, he realized he had forgotten the folder containing the power of attorney at the mansion.

- Damn it, - he said, a rare sign of nervousness in his calm personality. Although he hated being late for any appointment, he couldn't make the purchase in his name without the general power of attorney Mrs. Fariza had given him. Left with no choice, he turned the car around and drove back to the mansion. When he reached the mansion, he quickly stopped the car and got out:

He was in a hurry to get to the appointment on time, and although everything seemed normal, as he approached the entrance, something unusual caught his eye. An unfamiliar car was parked outside the mansion. It wasn't just any car. This was one of those cars driven by high-ranking individuals who served a very special purpose. His sharp eyes immediately recognized the small private hospital emblem stuck to the windshield. A thousand thoughts raced through his mind. His eyebrows furrowed at the thought. The front door of the mansion opened, and a man dressed in a suit and carrying a black medical bag emerged from the mansion. Although he looked calm, there was a sense of urgency in his steps. It was as if the man wanted to leave before anyone could see him. When he looked around, he realized that Darvish had seen him. The man glanced at Darvish briefly, nodded politely, and walked toward the car. Darvish paused for a moment, knowing who this man was. This man was the chief physician of one of the most prestigious hospitals in Switzerland. It was unusual for a doctor to be here at this hour. Had Mrs. Fariza's health been in such a bad state that he would have to call a doctor right away? Then why had the head physician of the hospital come straight away, not an ambulance? In such an emergency, it was impossible for Mrs. Fariza not to inform him first. With these thoughts, she continued walking towards the mansion with her usual calmness. When Darvish reached the office, he

hesitated for a second and knocked on the door carefully. The door opened and Mrs. Fariza appeared behind her desk with her usual calm expression.

- Darvish?! - she asked curiously, - I didn't expect you to return so soon. Is there a problem?

- I forgot the general power of attorney you issued in my name here, - he said and entered, his eyes starting to examine every detail in the room.

Mrs. Fariza's desk was as neat as ever, but a dark blue folder placed on the edge of the desk clearly did not belong here. It had the same emblem on it that the man had just seen on the window of his car, this could not be a coincidence.

- I see, - Mrs. Fariza said, - I believe you have prepared everything necessary for the meeting, - she added.

- Of course, - Darvish replied immediately. He hesitated for a moment, unable to decide whether to ask the question that had been stuck in his mind. Finally, he made up his mind and asked:

- When I arrived, I saw a doctor's car leaving the mansion. Is everything okay?

Mrs. Fariza's expression did not change. A faint smile graced her lips and she said:

- It was just a routine checkup. You know how meticulous these doctors like to be.

Darvish did not ask any further questions, knowing that Mrs. Fariza would not reveal anything she did not want to. But a feeling arose within him that made him very uneasy. A feeling of insecurity. Although Mrs. Fariza had been a closed book to the whole world since the tragic death of her daughter Ela, this book had always been open to Darvish with all its pages. For the first time in many years, He felt that Mrs. Fariza was reluctant to share some topic with him. Breaking free from the thoughts in his mind, he said:

- With your permission, I will go now, - he bowed.

- You are free, - Mrs. Fariza gestured to him with her hand.

As Darvish walked towards his car, images of the man, the emblem on the car and the folder on the table came to life in his mind. Something had happened in this mansion today and he could feel it. Mrs. Fariza's explanation was true, his routine health check-ups were conducted by his personal doctor directly at the mansion, not at the hospital. If he had had another time, he would have revealed this truth at any cost. Although his intuition told him that he was being lied to, his conscience, guided by years of loyalty, told him not to get involved in this matter and to trust Mrs. Fariza's word. Taking a deep breath, he started the car and drove away, concentrating his thoughts on Almas' plans. He calculated his next moves like a chess player to make sure everything would go his way. But a seed of unease within him that couldn't be easily eradicated continued to haunt him.

As the day drew to a close, the mansion glowed in the darkness. The smell of freshly cooked food came from the kitchen, which was surprisingly different from the food Mariam usually prepared. This evening, Mrs. Fariza had decided to prepare the meals herself. The household members were slowly starting to return. Darvish, who was the first to arrive home, was surprised when he passed by the kitchen and saw Mrs. Fariza stirring a pot of meat broth in an apron. Thomas, Mariam, and Almas entered behind him and were met with this sight. Thomas, embarrassed and blushing, whispered:

- It seems that the world has come to an end.

Mariam laughed softly and shook her head from side to side. Seeing them looking at her, Mrs. Fariza said sarcastically:

- What are you looking at? Wash your hands right away and sit down at the table.

The mansion members changed their clothes in excitement and sat down at the table. The long dining table was simply but beautifully decorated. The white porcelain plates and crystal glasses, sparkling in the delicate light of the chandelier, captivated everyone in the dining room. Mariam recognized the dinner set as soon as she saw it. It was the same set that Mrs. Fariza had used years ago, the set that had been reserved for private guests. The fact that Mrs. Fariza

had used them for a simple dinner was a symbol of the value she placed on the people of the mansion.

When the food arrived, everyone was speechless. The centerpiece of the meal was a golden rice dish, jeweled with saffron and adorned with slivers of almonds and pistachios, like precious gems embedded in gold. Beside it was a second pilaf, enriched with barberries that added bursts of tart sweetness, their deep red hue contrasting with the fluffy white grains. These were not just dishes but works of art, each one crafted with care and attention to detail. Alongside the pilafs was a rich stew, slow-cooked with tender meat, soft eggplants, and aromatic spices, its surface shimmering with a delicate layer of oil. A platter of stuffed vegetables—peppers, tomatoes, and zucchini—filled with fragrant rice and herbs completed the feast. Fresh yogurt with a hint of mint was served on the side, along with warm flatbreads sprinkled with sesame seeds. The meal was a tapestry of flavors—sweet, sour, savory, and earthy—all harmonizing perfectly. Even Thomas, who had never tasted such cuisine before, found himself savoring every bite with childlike enthusiasm.

As the group gathered around the table, the conversation initially centered on their amazement.

- Mrs. Fariza, - Thomas exclaimed, wide-eyed as he took a bite of the jeweled rice, - I didn't know you could cook like this. This is... incredible.

Even Darvish, typically reserved, nodded in appreciation:

- It's a rare treat, Mrs. Fariza. This must have taken you hours.

Mrs. Fariza, seated at the head of the table, allowed herself a small smile.

- There was a time when I cooked like this often, - she said, - Cooking is an art, much like architecture. Every ingredient has its place, and every flavor tells a story.

Mariam, ever the nurturer, added:

- It's not just the flavors; it's the love you've put into this meal. It reminds me of the feasts my grandmother used to prepare.

Almas, sitting beside Mariam, couldn't contain her delight.

- This is the best meal I've had in years, - she said, her eyes sparkling,
- Thank you, Mrs. Fariza. It feels like... *home*...

As the meal continued, the conversation turned to the events of the day. Almas recounted her meeting with the designers, her voice animated as she described how they had brought her vision for the *Red Dragon Society* to life.

- I've decided on the name, - she announced, her excitement evident,
- It will be called the *Red Dragon Society*, inspired by the story I read a few years ago at your library. It feels... *meaningful*.

Mariam nodded approvingly:

- It's a perfect name, Almas. Strong and symbolic. Your students will feel proud to be part of it.

Darvish updated everyone on the real estate options for the school's location, with steady and thoughtful tone he said:

- There are three promising sites, but the one near the lake seems the best. It offers both space and a serene environment, ideal for a martial arts school.

Thomas, ever the joker, added:

- And I spent my day chauffeuring everyone, but I did manage to grab some sweets on the way back, - He placed a small box of pastries on the table, earning laughter and thanks from the group.

As the evening unfolded, the atmosphere grew warmer. The group shared stories, laughter, and a deep sense of camaraderie. Almas felt a wave of gratitude wash over her. This was what she had missed during her years in Japan—a sense of belonging, of being surrounded by people who truly cared for her. At one point, Thomas raised his glass:

To Mrs. Fariza, - he said, with sincere voice, - For giving us not just this amazing meal but also a reason to come together.

Everyone raised their glasses, murmuring their agreement. Mrs. Fariza, typically reserved, gave a rare, soft smile.

- Thank you, - she said, - ***But tonight is not about me. It's about all of us. About what we've built together and what lies ahead.*** I want to thank you all for your hard work today. ***This is not an easy***

road we're walking, but together, we are making something extraordinary. Thank you all again, and good night, - She stood up saying this. As soon as she stood up, the people at the table stood up as well and bowed respectfully to her.

The founding of the Red Dragon Society marked a significant milestone in Almas's life. **The school, born from her passion for Iaido and her desire to create a sanctuary for young minds,** quickly became the most sought-after martial arts institution in Switzerland. Almas's vision was clear from the beginning: **the school would not merely be a place to learn swordsmanship but a haven where discipline, respect, and inner strength would flourish. Despite its growing prestige, Almas insisted that the school remain accessible to everyone, regardless of their financial background. She personally ensured that children from shelters and underprivileged backgrounds were given opportunities to enroll. Her rule was simple: only those with genuine passion and commitment could join, whether they came from wealthy families or had nothing but a dream.**

Thus was founded the Red Dragon Society. This was a turning point in Almas's life in Switzerland. Born from her love of Iaido and desire to help young people grow in the right direction, the school quickly became the most famous martial arts school in Switzerland. The goal of this school was clear from the beginning: **children who came here would not only learn swordsmanship, but also become a nest where inner strength would develop, making it a part of a disciplined life.** Despite the school's growing prestige in society, Almas insisted on making the school accessible to everyone, regardless of financial status. She personally ensured that children deprived of parental care and with limited financial means could enroll in the school completely free of charge. The conditions for admission to this school as a student were very simple: **only those with a real desire and responsibility could join the ranks of the "selected" students of the Iaido school.** The fame of Almas's school began in Zurich and spread throughout Switzerland. Within six months of the first school opening, new branches had opened in almost every town in Switzerland. Members of the elite of Swiss society were already competing with each other to have their

children educated at the school. However, Almas's rules were strictly observed. She consistently rejected offers of large donations and requests made to her through intermediaries, and made it clear that money and influence had no role in her school. This situation increased the interest in her school from all walks of life tenfold. Children who were now eligible to become students of his school were considered to have a special prestige. Almas's sharp character and principles as a leader earned her great respect and admiration throughout the country. **The school quickly became a symbol of hope, embodying the ideals of the legendary Red Dragon, combining strength, will and compassion.** Guided by Almas's teachings, students sought to excel not only in martial arts but also in life, adopting the discipline and philosophy of Iaido to overcome challenges.

Almas also thrived in her academic career. She was appointed as an **Assistant Professor** at a prestigious university, where she spearheaded innovative research in architectural history. Her dedication to exploring the intersections of culture, history, and design earned her widespread recognition. With the university's support, Almas established a research lab dedicated to architectural history, focusing on the symbolic language of ancient and modern structures. Her lab became a hub for students and scholars who shared her passion for understanding the deeper meanings behind architectural designs. Almas became a beloved mentor to her students. Her approachable demeanor, combined with her intellectual rigor, inspired those she taught. She often shared stories from her time in Japan, emphasizing the importance of resilience, curiosity, and humility in both life and academia.

Shortly after returning to Switzerland, Almas was appointed CEO of the company. As the head of the Swiss branch of Mrs. Fariza's company, Almas embraced her role with determination and innovation. Over the year, she proved herself to be not only a capable architect but also a visionary businesswoman. Under her leadership, the company completed several high-profile projects, blending contemporary design with traditional influences. Almas's unique approach—infusing architecture with symbolic and cultural meaning—set her apart in the industry. Almas focused on expanding the company's portfolio to include more sustainable and community-focused projects. She believed that architecture should

serve the people and the environment, a philosophy she instilled in her team. The business world quickly recognized Almas as Mrs. Fariza's protégé and successor. Her ability to navigate complex negotiations with grace and precision earned her the respect of her peers and competitors alike. Darvish played a important role in guiding Almas through the intricacies of leadership and business strategy. His calm demeanor and wealth of experience provided her with the tools she needed to excel in her role.

Almas's achievements did not go unnoticed. The media began to highlight her as a rising star in Switzerland, often referring to her as the ***"Princess of the Red Dragon."*** While she appreciated the recognition, Almas remained grounded, focusing on her goals rather than the spotlight. Balancing her responsibilities as a teacher, researcher, businesswoman, and founder of the *Red Dragon Society* was no easy feat. Yet, Almas managed to excel in each role, demonstrating remarkable resilience and time management. The year solidified Almas's sense of purpose. She found immense fulfillment in helping children through her school, advancing knowledge through her research, and creating meaningful structures through her architectural projects. Each aspect of her life fed into the other, creating a harmonious balance. Almas's journey from a shy, inexperienced young woman to a confident, respected leader was evident in every aspect of her life. She had grown into her role as a torchbearer for Mrs. Fariza's legacy, carrying forward the ideals of compassion, strength, and vision. As the year ended, Almas stood at the pinnacle of her achievements, yet she knew this was just the beginning. Her journey as the leader of the *Red Dragon Society*, a pioneer in architecture, and a mentor to the next generation had only begun. Her determination to honor Mrs. Fariza's legacy while carving her own path filled her with a sense of purpose and anticipation for the future.

The long dining table in the mansion's grand dining room had become a place of comfort and camaraderie over the past year. The scent of freshly baked bread and hearty stews wafted through the air, as Mariam, clad in her modest apron, placed the last of the dishes on the table. She took pride in these meals, ensuring they were not only delicious but also full of warmth—a symbol of the family-like bond the mansion members had developed.

The table was laden with a variety of dishes: roasted vegetables with a touch of olive oil and spices, a golden pilaf that shimmered under the soft glow of the chandelier, and a tender lamb stew seasoned with herbs. A fresh salad, dotted with slices of citrus and sprigs of mint, added a burst of color to the spread. Mariam took her seat with a satisfied smile, nodding at Almas, who sat across from her.

Almas, now more relaxed and vibrant after a year of intense achievements, poured herself a glass of water. To her right, Darvish was already engaged in light banter with Thomas, who had a knack for injecting humor into any conversation. Tonight, they were laughing about an earlier incident when Thomas had accidentally spilled coffee on one of Almas's documents, earning a playful glare:

- At least I made your dull paper look more lively,- Thomas quipped, grinning.

- You call a thesis dull? - Almas retorted, raising an eyebrow, though a small smile tugged at her lips.

Darvish chuckled, with deep voice adding a warmth to the room:

- Thomas, one day, Almas might design something so grand, you'll feel proud to have been a part of it—even if it's just by spilling coffee on the drafts.

As the plates were passed around and everyone began to eat, Mrs. Fariza set down her fork and dabbed her lips with a napkin. She cleared her throat softly, a signal that always caught everyone's attention. The table fell into a natural silence, all eyes turning toward her.

- I've been thinking,- she began, with measured yet thoughtful voice,
- about the Red Dragon Society. It has grown far beyond what any of us anticipated in just a year. The influence it has garnered, the lives it has touched—**it is no small feat.**

She paused, her gaze sweeping across the table, resting briefly on Almas, who looked back with wide, curious eyes.

- **The Red Dragon Society**, - she continued, - has become something far greater than I ever imagined. It is no longer just an idea or a project; it has become a symbol of discipline, hope, and transformation. And it has become so because of each of you—

because of your dedication and the belief that we can create something meaningful in this world.

Thomas nodded subtly, and Darvish folded his arms, listening intently. Mariam leaned slightly forward, her expression one of anticipation.

- For this reason, - Mrs. Fariza said, her tone growing more resolute,
- I have decided that we must mark the first anniversary of the Red Dragon Society with something extraordinary, — a banquet. Not just for us, but for the world to see what we have accomplished.

Almas tilted her head, intrigued.

- A banquet? - she asked softly. Almas straightened in chair; her interest piqued. **The Red Dragon Society** had become a cornerstone of her life, **a symbol of everything she had worked for.** Darvish leaned back slightly, his expression unreadable but attentive, while Mariam folded her hands in her lap, listening intently.

- Yes, - Mrs. Fariza affirmed, - A grand celebration at this very mansion. This will be a grand affair, one that will bring together people from all walks of life. We will invite the most prominent figures from business world, academia, and society. The banquet will showcase the ideals of the **Red Dragon Society**. **It will be a statement, a moment to reflect on what we have achieved and to inspire others to join us in our vision. It will not be a mere display of wealth but a demonstration of what we stand for—a reminder to the world of the importance of discipline, honor, and, above all, UNITY. A year ago, it was merely an idea. Today, it is a beacon of hope for so many. And that is worth honoring.**

She leaned slightly forward, her piercing gaze landing directly on Almas.

- And you, Almas, will be the face of this celebration. The media already calls you the '**Princess of the Red Dragon,**' and I believe it is time for you to embrace that role fully. You are no longer just a student, a leader, or even a martial artist. **You are a symbol, Almas, and symbols have the power to inspire.**

Almas asked with widened eyes:

- Are you sure you want to hold this party in the mansion? Wouldn't it bother you to have so many people suddenly come to a place that is related to your personal life?

Mrs. Fariza placed her right hand on her left hand of Almas, who was sitting on her right and said with a friendly smile:

- Don't worry, my dear, I want the walls of this mansion, which lives in the dusty memories of the years, to come alive again. This is your home, and as the *Princess of the Red Dragon*, you should, of course, welcome the guests *"in your palace"*.

Almas felt a wave of emotions ripple through her—a mixture of pride, gratitude, and a touch of trepidation. She nodded, her voice steady but tinged with emotion.

- I understand, Mrs. Fariza. I will do my best to honor this trust.

Mrs. Fariza gave a small, approving smile before addressing the rest of the table.

- Darvish, you will handle the logistics of the banquet. Don't forget the media, of course, you will set up a separate corner for them where they can comfortably interview Almas. I don't want even the slightest mishap. Everything had to be perfect that night. For the first time in many years, I will join the community with all my might, stronger and more powerful. I believe that you will not disappoint me. I have infinite trust in you on such matters.

- Thomas, you will ensure our guests' transportation is seamless. You will seat everyone in turn without making any guests wait. I hope you can do it.

- Mariam, I will need your expertise in overseeing the catering and décor. This banquet must be flawless because it is not just a celebration—it is a statement. I want the best catering company in Switzerland to serve us at this party. For the food, I want to see Zurich's most renowned chefs personally prepare the dishes.

- My beautiful Almas, you will be the center of attention all night. At the end of that party, not only the whole country, but the entire world media will be talking about you and your successes. It is time

to introduce Almas Nielk - the Princess of the Red Dragon - to the whole world, - she concluded.

The room buzzed with a renewed sense of purpose as everyone exchanged glances. Almas felt a spark ignite within her. It was clear to everyone present that this banquet would be a defining moment—not just for the Red Dragon Society **but for their collective journey as a family**. The rest of the dinner was filled with lively chatter about the event, each person contributing ideas and discussing their roles. **It was a simple meal, yet it carried the weight of something monumental a turning point not just for the Red Dragon Society but for each of them as individuals. *The mansion was no longer just a home; it was the birthplace of a legacy.***

And so the big day arrived. When Almas woke up to a new day, sunlight was already streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling panoramic windows in her room. A few seconds after she opened her eyes, looked at the clock with excitement, remembering the essence of this day. The clock was already showing 10. She got out of bed excitedly, washed hands and face, changed clothes, and hurriedly began to descend the huge stairs of the mansion with excitement. Mariam greeted her and hugged her. Due to the abundance of plans for the day, the mansion's people had to cancel their traditional breakfast together. Darvish and Thomas had left home at 5 am and headed to the airport, to meet the guests from abroad and make sure that they were all settled into their rooms in the hotel reserved for them without any problems. Mrs. Fariza had booked one of the most prestigious hotels in Zurich for three days for the guests from abroad. Mrs. Fariza had contributed to this day with the financial and cultural relations she had built over the years. Although the invitations were delivered only a week in advance, everyone had put aside all their plans to attend this special invitation as one, because of Mrs. Fariza's personal seal on the envelope. The personal seal was a symbol that Mrs. Fariza had used for VIP events years ago. These invitations, which were sent only on special occasions and to only selected people, were a harbinger of something very important.

Mariam ate breakfast with Almas in the kitchen. Almas, who had not seen Mrs. Fariza this morning, asked Mariam where she was,

and Mariam said that she had gone to court this morning with her lawyers to resolve some legal issues.

- The court?! Why didn't I know about this? - Almas raised an eyebrow at Mariam, half-concerned.

- Don't worry, it's just business, you can't choose the court date, unfortunately, and I'm sure Mrs. Fariza would never leave you alone on the morning of such an important day, - she said, stroking her head, - And you don't have time to think about these things now, miss, since you've finished your meal, go to the dressing room! The team will be here to prepare you soon, - she said, half-jokingly, smiling.

At that moment, the doorbell rang. When Mariam hurriedly opened the door, she saw a large truck standing at the door. The person in charge who knocked on the door said:

- Good morning, miss. We have come to decorate the venue due to today's invitation. With your permission, we would like to start preparations immediately so as not to fall behind schedule.

Mariam showed them the large room and returned to Almas.

Teams of decorators moved through the mansion with quiet efficiency, adorning every corner with magnificent bouquets. The arrangements were nothing short of breathtaking—red roses symbolizing passion and strength intertwined with gold accents that reflected opulence and royalty. The sweet, floral fragrance filled the air, blending harmoniously with the polished wood and stone of the estate. The grand banquet hall was the centerpiece of it all. The decorators worked tirelessly, hanging shimmering silk draperies in hues of crimson and gold, placing candles in crystal holders that would cast a warm glow in the evening, and arranging the tables with meticulous precision. Each table was set with gold-rimmed china, delicate crystal glassware, and centerpieces featuring miniature Red Dragon emblems carved from ruby-colored glass.

After breakfast with Mariam, Almas returned to her room to prepare. The room itself had been transformed for the day. Her exclusively made black silk gown had been delivered and hung on a padded hanger, waiting for her. The dress was a masterpiece of craftsmanship, designed with a one-sleeve silhouette that flowed

into a dramatic train, its fabric shimmering like liquid midnight under the light. Embroidered along the hem was a delicate Red Dragon emblem in subtle ruby and gold thread—a personal touch that made the dress all the more meaningful. The best hairstylist and makeup artist in the city arrived just before noon, greeted by Mariam. They set up their tools in Almas's spacious dressing area, their movements quick and confident as they worked to enhance her natural beauty. Her hair was styled into soft, cascading waves that fell gracefully over her left shoulder, framing her face with an air of effortless elegance. Her makeup was subtle yet striking, with a touch of crimson on her lips and a faint shimmer of gold across her eyes. Black, long-drawn eyeliner and red lipstick were the accents of this simple make-up. They did not allow Almas to look in the mirror until the last moment. Finally, they left her alone with Mariam so that Almas could finish her work and put on her dress. With Mariam's help, Almas put on the dress that had been prepared for her.

Almas stood in her room, a vision of elegance and strength. She wore a stunning black silk gown, tailored to perfection. The dress was a one-sleeve masterpiece, its design sophisticated yet bold, accentuating her graceful posture and lithe frame. The fabric shimmered faintly under the light, catching the subtle embroidery of the Red Dragon emblem near the hem—a delicate touch of ruby and gold thread that spoke of power and legacy. Draped over her left shoulder was a long silk scarf, its fabric light and fluid, bearing the striking Red Dragon emblem at its end. The emblem was intricately designed, the crimson dragon swirling in a fierce yet majestic pose. The scarf moved gently with every step she took, adding an air of regality to her presence. Her hair was a masterpiece of elegance. Deep, glossy black curls cascaded down, but they were styled with precision and care. Most of her curls were gathered into a chic, twisted updo, held in place by a discreetly ornate hairpiece, while a few soft tendrils framed her almond-shaped face. The design was a perfect balance of modern sophistication and timeless beauty. Almas's large, dark brown eyes were striking against her flawless complexion. Their almond shape gave her an expressive look, a mix of quiet determination and serene confidence. Her makeup was minimal yet impactful—a touch of gold shimmer on her eyelids, a subtle blush enhancing her high cheekbones, and a bold crimson hue on her lips that matched the Red Dragon emblem perfectly. Every

detail of her appearance exuded a sense of purpose and elegance. The combination of the flowing black dress, the symbolic scarf, and her radiant yet composed demeanor made her a figure impossible to ignore. Almas looked every bit the leader she had become—a woman of power, grace, and an unshakable connection to the legacy of the Red Dragon.

Since she was already ready, she did not recognize herself when she went to the mirror. It was as if a princess from ancient times was looking at her in the mirror. *It was not the dress, the hair, or the make-up that was the issue. These details, each of which was quite simple individually, combined on Almas's delicate, delicate body and managed to reveal her soul as an image. The elegance, compassion, and nobility in her soul were felt not only from the inside, but also from the outside.*

As the final signatures were placed on the documents and the last handshake given, Mrs. Fariza stood in the courtyard, radiating a rare sense of quiet triumph. The three lawyers, dressed impeccably in their tailored suits, offered her their congratulations once more.

- Congratulations, Mrs. Fariza, - the head lawyer said with a respectful bow, - This is a significant moment. You've made a remarkable choice.

Mrs. Fariza nodded, her usual stoic expression softened just slightly. - Thank you, - she replied, her voice steady and composed. She turned briefly to glance at the fountain behind her, the gentle sound of cascading water harmonizing with the serene atmosphere of the courtyard.

The lawyers walked her to the car waiting just beyond the gate. Its polished black exterior reflected the sunlight, an image of understated luxury and power. Darvish, standing by the open car door, gave a subtle bow as Mrs. Fariza approached. His sharp black suit and poised demeanor reflected his role as her most trusted confidant.

One of the lawyers extended his hand one last time.

- It has been an honor to assist in this process. Best wishes to you, madam.

She accepted the handshake briefly.

- I expect the same level of discretion moving forward, - she said with tone leaving no room for interpretation.

- Of course, - the lawyer assured her, - Everything remains confidential, as per your instructions.

Satisfied, Mrs. Fariza stepped gracefully into the car. Darvish closed the door behind her with care, then moved to the driver's seat. The lawyers remained at the gate, watching the car glide away down the gravel path. Inside the car, Mrs. Fariza leaned back against the fine leather seat, her hands resting delicately in her lap. Her gaze was fixed out the window, where the city of Zurich unfolded in its quiet elegance. She said nothing, allowing the hum of the car engine and the occasional sound of tires on cobblestone streets to fill the space.

Darvish, ever attentive, glanced at her through the rearview mirror.

- Shall I take you directly back to the mansion, madam?

- Not yet, we need to pick up the package I ordered from the jeweler.

- Considering the price of your order, it is understandable that they would not want to hand it over to anyone but you, - Darvish said half-jokingly.

Mrs. Fariza smiled and nodded in agreement. The car continued to drive and stopped in front of the most famous and expensive jewelry store in the heart of Zurich. Seeing Mrs. Fariza's car approaching the entrance, the store manager personally came out to greet her. Holding out the small paper bag in his hand, he bowed respectfully and said:

- We hope that we have not disappointed you as a brand, madam. These pieces are unique in the world, not only for their price, but also for their unique design and spiritual value. It was an honor for us to make them for you.

Mrs. Fariza took the bag and carefully opened the two small boxes inside and looked inside. Everything was as she had wished.

- Thank you! You can use the bank check I gave you as of today, - she said and left the store. The manager led her to the car and sent on his way. Mrs. Fariza, who got into the car, said to Darvish:

- We can now go directly to the mansion. You can then return to the hotel and make sure that all the rented vehicles will bring the guests at the appointed time. How is Thomas's work? Can he get out of such a responsibility?

- Thomas does not leave the team I have assigned to him for a moment. The car escort assigned to the guests for the evening will set off for the mansion with Thomas and his team. You can be sure that everything will go according to plan.

- Excellent! - Mrs. Fariza, with a half-sad, half-joyful smile on her face, leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

The air inside the car was heavy with unspoken thoughts, the weight of her decision and its implications lingering between them. As they left the courtyard behind, Mrs. Fariza allowed herself a rare moment of reflection. Her gaze remained distant, her mind not on the city streets passing by but on the young woman waiting unknowingly at the mansion. *She was preparing a gift not just of material value but of legacy, love, and trust—a gesture that would tie their fates together forever.* For now, though, she held her composure, letting the quiet strength that defined her fill the space. The car disappeared into the rhythm of Zurich, leaving the courtyard and its memories behind, as the next steps of her carefully crafted plan unfolded.

The car reached the mansion and stopped. Mrs. Fariza looked at the preparations and went to Almas's room. She saw her standing in front of the mirror, oh God, Almas looked so elegant in her black dress and general appearance! Mrs. Fariza stood silently for a moment, watching Almas herself and looking at the joy in her eyes. Seeing her, Almas said:

- Mrs. Fariza! - ran to her with joy like a child.

Mrs. Fariza hugged her and kissed her on the face and said:

- Wait a minute, let me take a good look at you, - she said, taking her hands and taking a step back. Then she handed her the small paper bag she was wearing on her arm. Although Mariam realized that it was a gift worth a wealth when she saw the emblem on the bag, but, did not say anything about it to Almas in front of Mrs. Fariza thinking it could be out of politeness.

Almas accepted it with both hands, a gesture of respect in Japanese culture . As she carefully unwrapped the package, she discovered a delicate hairpin, or *kanzashi*, adorned with a red dragon design, and a matching white gold arm bracelet encrusted with rubies, both symbolizing strength and legacy. Overwhelmed with joy, tears welled up in Almas's almond-shaped dark brown eyes. Mariam, standing nearby, assisted her in placing the *kanzashi* into her elegantly styled hair and fastening the bracelet onto her arm. The *kanzashi* not only enhanced her appearance but also connected her to a rich cultural tradition, as these hair ornaments have been integral to Japanese hairstyles since the Heian period, symbolizing various aspects of beauty and status .

As soon as Almas saw these gifts, tears welled up in her large, dark brown eyes. She looked at Mrs. Fariza with fragile childish eyes and said:

- After all, these are... - she started to speak, but she couldn't finish her words.

- You deserve the best of everything, my dear, - Mrs. Fariza wiped her tears and kissed her forehead.

Wanting to break the fragile atmosphere, Mariam said to Almas:

- I think you should wear these magnificent gifts today. Come, let me help you wear them, - she put the hairpin in her hair. She put the bracelet on her open right arm and looked at her from afar.

Almas went to the mirror again and looked at herself. Mrs. Fariza, who stood behind her and looked at her reflection in the mirror with her:

- Are you scared? - Mrs. Fariza inquired softly.

Almas met her gaze in the mirror and replied with quiet confidence:

- No, I don't.

Pleased, Mrs. Fariza's smile widened slightly.

- Very well. The event will begin in an hour. Please enjoy your time. Mariam will call you when the time comes.

With a final, affectionate glance, Mrs. Fariza left the room, leaving Almas to reflect on the meaningful gifts and the momentous evening ahead.

As the evening descended, the mansion transformed into a scene of pure elegance and grandeur. Outside, the winding driveway shimmered under the soft glow of lanterns, each positioned meticulously to guide arriving guests. The steady procession of sleek black Audis, each gleaming like polished obsidian, moved in perfect synchronization, their tires whispering against the cobblestone. Darvish, the embodiment of calm authority, stood at the grand entrance, greeting every guest with a subtle nod and watchful eyes. Behind him, Thomas led the staff, ensuring every detail of the evening unfolded without a hitch. The air buzzed with anticipation as attendants, dressed immaculately, assisted guests with their belongings and guided them toward the illuminated mansion. Inside, the mansion exuded timeless sophistication. Hundreds of candles flickered against the walls, their golden glow casting intricate patterns across the high ceilings adorned with ornate chandeliers. The soft strains of a live string quartet filled the air, each note weaving seamlessly into the atmosphere of refined luxury. Positioned near the central hall, the musicians, dressed in sharp black ensembles, played with precision, their melodies creating a tranquil harmony. The dining room was a masterpiece of culinary and visual artistry. Tables draped in white linen were adorned with lavish floral arrangements of crimson roses and deep green leaves, a nod to the **Red Dragon Society**. Crystal goblets and silverware sparkled under the candlelight. Each dish, prepared with painstaking attention to detail, was a feast for the eyes: delicate hors d'oeuvres arranged like miniature sculptures, entrees plated with artistic precision, and desserts that seemed almost too beautiful to eat. As the hour of the banquet drew near, the mansion's grand hall began to fill with an eclectic mix of individuals. Local elite members exchanged pleasantries with international dignitaries. Diplomats and business magnates mingled with cultural icons and media representatives, the hum of their conversations underscoring the evening's significance. The Japanese ambassador, a guest of honor, stood at the center of attention, offering gracious bows to the hosts. Darvish and Thomas moved like shadows, ensuring every detail met perfection. The staff, under their careful guidance, moved swiftly and silently, replenishing glasses and addressing every need with seamless efficiency. The entire scene was one of coordinated splendor, a celebration that reflected Mrs. Fariza's impeccable standards and Almas's burgeoning reputation. As Almas descended

the grand staircase into the central hall, the room seemed to still for a moment. Draped in her striking black one-sleeve dress, the red dragon emblem on her flowing scarf catching the light, she exuded a presence both regal and commanding. Her dark, almond-shaped eyes scanned the room, meeting the gaze of the captivated guests, each of whom instinctively bowed in respect. The stage was set, and the evening promised to be one of unforgettable elegance and purpose. Every detail, from the flickering candles to the resonant chords of the quartet, spoke of a legacy being celebrated and a future being forged.

As the last of the esteemed guests settled into their seats or stood with glasses of champagne in hand, the soft hum of conversation began to fade. The string quartet in the corner concluded their piece, leaving a gentle echo of the final note hanging in the air. Darvish, standing tall near the central stage, straightened his jacket and stepped forward, his polished shoes clicking softly against the wooden floor. In his hand, he held a sleek silver microphone with demeanor calm yet commanding. The room fell silent as the guests turned their attention to him. With his usual composed aura, Darvish glanced around the hall, his black eyes reflecting the golden glow of the chandelier above.

- Ladies and gentlemen, - he began, his deep, steady voice carrying effortlessly through the grand hall, - On behalf of Mrs. Fariza and the Red Dragon Society, I welcome you all to this special evening. *Tonight, we are not just celebrating the first anniversary of an institution that represents resilience, discipline, and empowerment—we are also celebrating a vision. A vision that began as a spark in the heart of a woman whose strength and determination have touched us all.*

He paused, his gaze scanning the audience. The guests, a mixture of Switzerland's most elite and influential individuals, diplomats, and international dignitaries, hung onto his every word.

- As you look around this room, you will see the **unity** of cultures, the shared respect for tradition, and the collective belief in the power of purpose. ***The Red Dragon Society is not just a name—it is a symbol. A symbol of what can be achieved when we harness our strength and channel it toward the greater good.***

A soft murmur of agreement rippled through the crowd, but Darvish held up a hand, commanding their attention once more.

- Tonight, we celebrate not only the legacy of the Red Dragon but also the remarkable individuals who have brought this vision to life. And now, - he said, his tone shifting slightly, reverent and firm, - it is my honor to introduce the woman whose unwavering leadership, boundless wisdom, and unmatched grace have made all of this possible. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Mrs. Fariza.

The room erupted in polite applause, a symphony of clinking glasses and gloved hands. Darvish stepped back, bowing slightly as he gestured toward the grand staircase. All eyes turned to the staircase, where Mrs. Fariza appeared at the top step, her presence commanding yet elegant. Mrs. Fariza, amidst applause, entered the stage in all her splendor, as if she were a queen. This was her first appearance before such a distinguished crowd in many years. Everyone had come just to see this moment, and her long absence from public events had given rise to various rumors in society. Some said that after the tragic death of her daughter, she had lost her mind, while others said that she was overwhelmed with grief and could not recover. Dressed in a flowing black suit with subtle embroidered details, she descended the stairs with an air of quiet authority. Her white gold earrings caught the light with every step, and her dark, ballerina-styled hair seemed to crown her with the dignity of a queen. She moved with purpose, her sharp eyes scanning the room, acknowledging each guest with the faintest nod.

When she reached the stage, Darvish extended his hand to assist her up the small steps. She accepted with a gracious smile, murmuring a quiet "Thank you" before taking the microphone.

At that moment, all the rumors that had existed until now vanished like smoke. *Yes, now she was no longer the woman who had been broken by life, but was standing before them even stronger than before.* Her majestic gaze swept the hall, silencing all whispers in an instant. Some of the guests did not dare to say anything out of surprise, some out of fear. The large hall was suddenly plunged into silence. Mrs. Fariza took the microphone in her hand and began to speak in a determined voice:

- Good evening, - she said and continued, her sharp gaze as usual on those watching her, - it is very pleasant for me to receive you as a guest in my house. I know that people have been curious about me for many years. Over time, this curiosity turned into groundless rumors and spread as truth. With your permission, I want to tell you this first: ***pain can shake you, sadness can bend you, but no one can break you in this life unless you allow it.*** I stand before you tonight as a woman who has found purpose in her grief, not lost in her pain. I worked the last years of my life not for myself, but to leave a legacy for the future, - she paused. The entire hall applauded her with admiration. She waited for the applause to die down so that she could continue her speech. Her sharp eyes chose Almas, who was lost in the crowd, at that moment. As soon as she saw Almas, she smiled involuntarily and continued her speech: - As we celebrate the first anniversary of the **Red Dragon Society** this evening, I think it is more appropriate to introduce you to the main source of the ideals that this society represents. ***The person who carries the true spirit that the Red Dragon represents not only changed my life, but also became a source of hope and inspiration for hundreds of children,*** she said, and paused again. Everyone already understood who she was talking about. When I met Almas, - she began again, - I was a woman shrouded in grief, living in the shadow of a deep loss that had taken away all my hope and will for life and the future. I had built such invisible high walls around me that I did not believe that anyone could break through them. But Almas managed to do it. She melted and broke the walls of ice in my heart, and she did it not by force, but with the purity of her heart and the strength of her soul. ***I realized that by distancing myself from people and building walls to protect myself, I had actually punished myself by condemning myself to loneliness,*** - although her voice was relatively soft, the power of her words echoed throughout the hall.

Everyone held their breath and listened to her. The story of a warrior like Mrs. Fariza who awakened a "*sleeping dragon*" was interesting to everyone, because they knew well Mrs. Fariza's character, how difficult it was to get close to her and, moreover, to gain her trust! Mrs. Fariza continued, with a voice as if she were telling a story, captivating the audience:

- **Almas reminded me that there is light even in the darkest moments of life.** She gave me the courage to dream again and to believe that **the pain I had endured could be transformed into something meaningful,** - said Mrs. Fariza, who was moved, and paused for a moment. The guests' attention turned to the girl standing quietly in front of the stage, her eyes shining with emotion.

- **The Red Dragon Society,** - Mrs. Fariza continued, - **is something that means more than an organization. It is a symbol of will, unity and purpose. It is not because it comes from wealth or status, but from the power of innocence that comes from caring for others, standing up for what is right and protecting those who cannot protect themselves.** She pointed at Almas with a proud smile and added, - This young lady who once entered my life as a stranger is now my daughter in every sense of the word. **She will not only keep the ideals of the Red Dragon Society alive, but will also carry them forward.** I have complete faith in her on this path. As we look to the future, **I hope that this society will not only be a center for martial arts and spiritual development, but also a light for those seeking strength in their most difficult times.** I thank you all in advance for being a part of this path, for your support, and for believing in this goal.

With that, all the guests understood Mrs. Fariza's purpose in inviting them. **A new young player would be joining the game.** Mrs. Fariza clearly wanted the guests to support this player. Mrs. Fariza smiled heartily at Almas, her eyes shining with pride, and nodded in agreement. She concluded her speech by saying:

- Now, let's take a closer look at the achievements and future goals of this society so far: I wish you an evening you will remember for many years and I end my speech by saying "welcome" once again, - she said and left the stage with dignity and elegance.

The hall erupted in applause once more, and for the first time in decades, Mrs. Fariza smiled—an expression that radiated triumph. The whispers had been silenced; the room was hers. Far from the broken woman many had imagined, she was a phoenix risen from her ashes, stronger and more indomitable than ever. Throughout the evening, the murmurs of admiration replaced the former

rumors. Diplomats and elite members approached her, eager to reconnect and express their respect.

- She's still the queen, - someone whispered, and the sentiment rippled across the room.

The event not only celebrated the Red Dragon Society's first anniversary but also solidified Mrs. Fariza's legacy. By the end of the night, one thing was clear: Mrs. Fariza had not only silenced her critics but also reclaimed her position as one of the most powerful and respected figures in the room.

As the presentation was about to begin, the lights in the grand hall dimmed, leaving only a soft glow on the stage. The large screen at the center displayed the emblem of the Red Dragon Society, shimmering against a black background. A hush fell over the audience as the first notes of a powerful march began to fill the room. The live band, seated in a semi-circle to the right of the stage, began their performance. The composition, written exclusively for the Red Dragon Society, was a grandiose and moving piece. It started with the slow, deliberate beat of drums, mimicking the sound of a warrior's footsteps. Gradually, violins joined in, their melody evoking strength and unity, followed by the deep, resonant notes of cellos. The music was neither overly somber nor overly triumphant—it struck a perfect balance between reverence and celebration. As the music swelled, the screen transitioned to a video montage. Images of the Red Dragon Society's milestones from the past year played in seamless succession. Footage of children practicing Iaido with focused expressions and students bowing respectfully to their instructors was juxtaposed with scenes of underprivileged children receiving their uniforms, their faces glowing with gratitude. The visuals shifted to show the school's stunning architecture—a blend of modern design with traditional Japanese elements. The camera lingered on the dojo's polished wooden floors, the carefully curated spaces of harmony and discipline, and the red dragon emblem painted proudly on the walls. The band's music built to a crescendo, with horns and percussion amplifying the atmosphere. At this moment, the video showcased the impact of the Red Dragon Society beyond the dojo. Testimonials from parents and community leaders flashed on the screen, their voices narrating how the school had become a sanctuary for their

children, a place of hope and transformation. Suddenly, the music softened, allowing a voiceover to take center stage:

- The Red Dragon Society is not just a school. It is a movement—a place where strength is cultivated, not for dominance, but for protection. It is a beacon of hope, ensuring that every child, regardless of their circumstances, has the chance to find their own power, their own fire.

As the voice concluded, the tempo of the music rose dramatically. The screen displayed a breathtaking animation of a dragon, its scales glowing red and gold, circling around the world. With each flap of its mighty wings, it left trails of fire that ignited flames in different cities—symbolizing the international reach of the society in the future. At the climactic moment, the dragon landed on the screen, opened its mouth, and let out a burst of fire. Simultaneously, the band hit their strongest note, the horns blaring with magnificent energy, while the drums pounded like a heartbeat.

Just as the band reached its crescendo, the visuals took their most dramatic turn. The dragon on the screen reared up and unleashed a torrent of flames that seemed to burst out of the screens themselves, thanks to the perfectly timed pyrotechnic effects in the room. The audience gasped audibly, many leaning back in their chairs as they felt the heat of the simulated fire wash over them. *It was so real, so visceral, that it seemed the dragon's soul had leaped into the room to touch theirs.*

As the fiery animation faded, the Red Dragon Society's emblem appeared on the screen, glowing in red. Beneath it, the slogan appeared: **"The Power of Innocence"**

At the precise moment of the final, triumphant note, Almas appeared on stage, emerging from a shadowy side entrance. She walked slowly and purposefully, flanked by her students, each of whom carried a practice katana. The room was utterly silent for a moment, the audience too awestruck to react.

In a sudden reflex of fear, the guests then returned to reality and shook the entire hall with endless applause in front of the

magnificence of the show. None of the guests who came here this evening had even imagined that they would encounter such a sight. Returning to reality, the guests turned their attention to Almas and her students: Almas's banquet dress made of pure black silk seemed to flow around her, and the shawl detail with the **Red Dragon emblem** fluttered like a victory banner. For a moment, Almas' emotions took over her. She was not an actress or a singer, **she was a warrior, and warriors never showed their emotions openly in front of a crowd.** She could not look happy and smiling in front of the thunderous applause. As befits a true iaido fighter, she stood in absolute surrender before the applause, without a single expression on her face, but a whirlwind of emotions was living inside her. She began to tremble from the wave of emotions. Although the scene, which was performed in 3 minutes, was created with artistic touches, *the main idea that was wanted to be conveyed was not just a bunch of words, but a part of Almas's soul, inner world.* Even though she was very emotional and moved, she could not shake the trust that Mrs. Fariza had shown in her. When she slowly raised head in the face of applause, she met his eyes... He had also been invited here today to watch Almas's success. At that moment, no one could understand what Almas felt as a warrior except Kobayashi Sensei, who had trained her on this path and knew her better than anyone. When Almas's eyes met those of her teacher in the crowd and he smiled and nodded his head as usual, it both stunned Almas and put her in the mood of a responsible student who obeyed his teacher without depending on herself. Psychologically, she forgot all other emotions. She straightened her posture like a princess and stood with the determination of a leader in front of the crowd that applauded her. Seeing this, the applause of the guests grew even louder, almost shaking the foundations of the mansion. Almas took the microphone and began to speak:

- On behalf of my students and myself, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to you for honoring us by attending this special evening.- Thank you for believing in this vision, for standing with us as we continue this journey. **Tonight, we are not just celebrating a society; we celebrate the world where the power that comes from innocence is used to protect and preserve, and every child is given the chance to rise to the top of their lives.** Right now, you see my 6 most successful students behind me, two of them come

from the most financially powerful families in Switzerland, two from shelters for those deprived of parental care, and two from families with limited financial resources. *But I assure you that none of you can guess which child here belongs to which group. **Because there are no groups in the Red Dragon Society. In the world I have built, people are not separated by their financial power and status, but rather complement each other under friendship and unity.*** As an ordinary person who does not have any magical powers, unfortunately, I cannot personally help all the children in the world. ***But I can build a system, a school, a world that ensures that children become individuals of their own choosing, not yours, mine, or society's.*** I set out on this path thinking that I could build this world and I was able to build it. Although my name is mentioned everywhere as the founder of the *Red Dragon Society*, there is no doubt that behind this success, words are not enough to express my gratitude to Mrs. Fariza, the most noble, powerful, and compassionate person I have ever known, to whom I owe everything in life, both financially and morally. *If you consider me a warrior of the Red Dragon in the fairy tale, then you should know that Mrs. Fariza is the Red Dragon itself in the fairy tale, who changes the life of every person she touches for the better with the warmth and kindness in her heart.* In the presence of all of you, we would like to express our endless gratitude to Mrs. Fariza, our spiritual leader, - she said, turning to Mrs. Fariza with the precision of a soldier and the elegance of a princess, and bowing to her.

Mrs. Fariza, who was moved, kept her composure and smiled and applauded them. The entire hall joined in the applause after her. After the applause died down, Almas continued her speech:

- Although there are many people who helped me on this path, after Mrs. Fariza, I would like to express my gratitude to my family members, Mr. Darvish, Mrs. Mariam, and Mr. Thomas. Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my dear and respected teacher, Kobayashi Sensei, who gave me the honor of introducing me to Iaido and becoming a warrior of this path, - she simply bowed respectfully in the manner called *saikeirei* at 45 degrees, which is the deepest symbol of gratitude in Japanese culture.

Kobayashi Sensei came on stage and bowed in return, showing that he accepted her respect. He took the microphone from Almas, said in accented English:

- Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to greet you all and express my deepest gratitude to you for your interest in Iaido, one of the most honorable and respected martial arts on earth. Almas could have given you, dear guests, a long, boring presentation of statistics as a report. But I think she put all her soul, creativity and sincerity into this presentation and presented her idea to you in the best possible way on earth. The real presentation is in front of you live. **If you want to see the real flame of the Red Dragon, look carefully into the eyes of these children**, - he said, pointing to the students on the stage. **The flame of the Red Dragon is in the light of hope for the future in the eyes of these children**. I think there is no need for any additional words here, I thank you all again, - by saying this, he ended his speech.

The applause rose again, but this time only for Almas. She had proven herself to distinguished people from different parts of the world and was accepted by them as Mrs. Fariza's successor tonight.

And thus, this important event was completed at a high level and in the most worthy manner. The guests slowly got into the cars reserved for them and were escorted to the hotel by a special security team. There was one last guest left - Kobayashi Sensei. Almas asked Mrs. Fariza for permission to host her teacher at the mansion. After Mrs. Fariza gave permission, she returned to her room. Thomas and Darvish, along with the security guard, escorted the guests to the hotel. Mariam kept them busy supervising the catering service. Almas, however, took the opportunity to go to the winter garden to chat with her beloved teacher. They talked for an hour, moving from topic to topic without stopping. At the end of the night, they said goodbye and retired to their rooms. Almas sat down at her dressing table. Only now did she realize how tired she was. She looked at her reflection in the mirror and smiled, ran her hand over the bracelet on her arm and said to herself:

- You have come to me in luck, my little friend.

She had just reached out to remove the pin from her hair when there was a knock on the door. It was Mariam who came. She slowly opened the door and said to Almas:

- Mrs. Fariza is waiting for you in her office, Almas.

Almas looked at her in surprise:

- Me? At this time? Did something happen? - she asked

Although Mariam knew the reason for Almas's summons, she smiled with her usual kindness and said:

- You can ask her yourself, little lady.

Almas understood from the expression on Mariam's face that some pleasant surprise awaited her. Despite the fatigue of the day, she hurried down the stairs with the enthusiasm of a child and went to the study. She knocked on the door, and when she heard the answer "come in" from inside, she slowly entered.

The room was warm and welcoming, lit by the flickering light of the fireplace. The antique furniture and bookshelves, filled with years of collected wisdom and memories, seemed to hold their breath for what was to come. On the desk, a single box rested—its red dragon emblem glowing in the soft light. Almas entered the cabinet last, still dressed in her black, one-sleeved gown. Her long scarf trailed behind her like a symbol of her newfound status, and the ruby accents of her bracelet and hairpin caught the light. Despite the overwhelming success of the evening, she looked tired, her almond-shaped eyes reflecting a mixture of pride and quiet humility.

Mrs. Fariza, seated behind her desk, gestured for them all to take a seat.

- I've called you here tonight, - she began, with calm but with a weight voice that silenced the room, - because there is something I've been waiting for the right moment to share.

Everyone exchanged glances, unsure of what was coming. Darvish, standing by the window, noticed the box on the desk and instinctively understood its significance.

Mrs. Fariza leaned forward, her piercing gaze locking onto Almas.

- My dear Almas, - she said softly, - this evening marked not only the celebration of the **Red Dragon Society's** success but also the passing of a torch—a torch that I have carried for far too long. She opened the box with deliberate care, revealing its contents. The intricate documents and a velvet pouch inside caught the attention of everyone in the room. The silence was heavy as she lifted the first document, its golden edges glinting in the firelight.

- This, - she said, holding it up for Almas to see, - is the court decision that makes you my legal daughter. From this moment on, you are not just my student, my protégé—you are my child in every sense of the word.

Almas froze, her breath catching in throat. Her hands trembled as she reached for the document, her eyes scanning the elegant calligraphy. Tears welled up in her eyes, spilling over as she looked up at Mrs. Fariza.

- Madam... - she whispered, her voice breaking, - I don't know what to say.

- You don't need to say anything, - Mrs. Fariza replied, her voice filled with love and pride, - You've already said everything through your actions, through your determination and strength. She pointed to another document below and added, - This document, my dear daughter, confirms that all my material possessions have been transferred to you. All my companies, movable and immovable property - in short, *everything that is mine is now yours*. In your speech today, you spoke of me as the Red Dragon. *Then know that from today on, the Red Dragon gives you all its power. You will now carry the torch of its fire.* I congratulate you, **you are no longer the Princess, but Empress of the Red Dragon.**

Almas took the bracelet and hairpin with trembling hands, her tears falling freely now.

- Madam, - she said, her voice shaking, - I don't deserve this.

- You do, - Mrs. Fariza said firmly, placing a hand on Almas's cheek.

- You deserve this and more. **You are the light in the darkness, the hope that I thought I had lost forever. And now, it's your turn to carry this light forward.**

Overwhelmed, Almas kissed Mrs. Fariza's hand, with tears soaking the older woman's skin. Mrs. Fariza leaned forward and kissed Almas's forehead, with touch filled with both love and a sense of finality.

Darvish, sensing the importance of the moment, discreetly captured a photograph of the two women—***a moment of unity and legacy that would forever define the Red Dragon Society.***

The room was heavy with emotion as Almas carefully placed the bracelet on her wrist and secured the hairpin in her styled hair. She looked at herself in the mirror, the weight of her new role sinking in. For a moment, she felt a surge of pride and purpose, but it was quickly replaced by a gnawing sense of dread she couldn't explain. The others in the room watched silently, their own emotions mirroring the significance of the moment. Mariam dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief, Thomas stood with his hands clasped tightly in front of him, and Darvish kept his gaze fixed on the floor, his jaw set.

Mrs. Fariza exhaled deeply, her expression softening.

- ***This is the beginning of a new chapter***, - she said, her voice gentle but resolute, - And I am so proud of all of you—especially you, Almas. ***You have given me a reason to hope again, a reason to believe in the future.***

The words hung in the air, a bittersweet note that seemed to resonate with everyone present. Almas glanced back at the documents in the box, her hands trembling as she reached for them. But as she did, a strange stillness fell over the room.

Mrs. Fariza's hand, which had been resting on the edge of the desk, suddenly slipped. Her eyes fluttered shut, and her body swayed slightly before collapsing forward. The room erupted into chaos as Almas screamed, "Madam!" and rushed to her side, cradling the older woman's head in her arms.

- Mrs. Fariza? - Almas's voice trembled with alarm.

Mrs. Fariza sank back into the sofa, her breathing labored. She clutched her temple, her face pale and strained. Almas was by her side in an instant, holding her shoulders.

- What's wrong? Please tell me! - Almas's voice was desperate now, rising in panic.

With great effort, Mrs. Fariza opened her eyes. Her voice was faint, barely audible.

- Almas... there's something I didn't tell you. I didn't want to burden you with it.

- Burden me?! - Almas shouted, her voice cracking with anguish, - You're everything to me! How could you—what's happening?

Mrs. Fariza's lips quivered as she spoke, her confession tearing through the silence.

- A year ago, they found a tumor. In my brain. It's inoperable. I... I only had a year. *And I used it to prepare everything for you.*

Almas froze. Her breath caught in her throat as the words hit her like a physical blow. Her heart thundered in her chest, her mind unable to process the enormity of what she'd just heard.

- YOU KNEW? YOU'VE BEEN SUFFERING ALL THIS TIME, AND YOU DIDN'T TELL ME? - Almas's voice broke, her hands trembling uncontrollably. Tears streamed down her face as she gripped Mrs. Fariza's shoulders, almost shaking her, - WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME? WHY DID YOU GO THROUGH THIS ALONE?!

Mrs. Fariza's gaze softened, her hand weakly reaching to touch Almas's tear-streaked cheek.

- Because you needed to be ready, my love. If I told you... you wouldn't have let me *do what needed to be done.*

Almas shook her head violently, her sobs uncontrollable.

- HOW COULD YOU THINK I WOULDN'T HELP YOU? YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO DO THIS ALONE! I... - Her words broke into wails of grief as she buried her face in her hands.

Her eyes fell on the red box. In a fit of despair, she grabbed it and threw it across the room.

- WAS IT ALL FOR THIS? MONEY? POWER? WHAT DO THEY MEAN IF YOU'RE NOT HERE?! - She yanked the white gold bracelet from her arm and hurled it to the floor, - WHAT'S THE POINT OF ANY OF THIS WITHOUT YOU?!

Mrs. Fariza's strength was failing. She slumped further into the sofa, her breathing shallow and uneven. Almas caught her just as she was about to collapse completely, cradling her frail body in her arms.

- NO... NO, NO, NO! - Almas cried, rocking back and forth, - DON'T LEAVE ME. PLEASE DON'T LEAVE ME! *M-O-T-H-E-R!*

Mrs. Fariza's hand reached up one last time, trembling as it rested on Almas's cheek. Her voice was barely a whisper.

- My beautiful daughter... don't cry. You're stronger than this. You're stronger than me. Take everything I've given you... *and make the world better.*

Her hand fell limp. Her head tilted back, her eyes closed. And just like that, the woman who had been Almas's pillar, her guide, her mother in all but blood, was gone. Almas's scream tore through the mansion, a sound of such raw, unfiltered pain that it echoed through the corridors, reaching every corner of the estate. Everyone in the house froze, the sound chilling them to their cores. For a moment, it was as though the entire world had stopped. Darvish burst into the room, followed by Mariam and Thomas. They stood frozen in shock, their faces pale as they took in the scene: Almas clutching Mrs. Fariza's lifeless body, her cries shaking the very air around them.

- Call the ambulance! - Almas barked to Thomas, with unsteady voice.

When the paramedics entered, Darvish tried to separate Almas from Mrs. Fariza's dead body. Almas, whose voice was drowned out by crying and screaming, hugged Darvish's arm and watched in silence as the doctors examined her without taking her eyes off Mrs. Fariza's lifeless body. The doctor, who had checked Mrs. Fariza's pulse and eyes, raised his left arm and looked at his watch and said:

- The patient's time of death is 01:22. Begin preparations for transporting the deceased to the morgue, - he instructed the other doctor who came with him.

Hearing this, Almas slipped out of Darvish's arms and ran to Mrs. Fariza's already dead body. He stroked her face again and this time said quietly with the innocence of a child:

- Come back, - she whispered through her sobs like a little child, - Please... come back to me...

It took Darvish and Thomas to gently pry her away, their own faces streaked with tears. Almas involuntarily recoiled as the doctors entered with a stretcher. They placed Mrs. Fariza's body in a black plastic bag and covered. She couldn't do anything. She was frozen. As they loaded the body into the ambulance and drove off, she suddenly woke up. As the ambulance's siren pierced the quiet night, Almas ran after it, barefoot and desperate. Her breaths came in frantic gasps as she chased the flashing red lights disappearing into the darkness. The cold pavement burned her feet, but she didn't feel it. Her mind screamed one command, over and over:

RUN! RUN! RUN! RUN AS MUCH AS YOU CAN!

She stumbled and fell, scraping her hands against the icy ground, but she got back up. Her legs trembled under her weight, her breath turned to clouds in the frigid air, but she didn't stop. She couldn't. It wasn't just her body propelling her forward; it was her grief, her disbelief, her inability to accept that the one person who had been her anchor was gone.

But as her muscles gave way, her body collapsed onto the frozen earth. She lay there, unable to rise. Her breath slowed, her vision blurred, and she whispered the word that escaped her lips like a prayer, a plea, and a cry for help:

- M-O-T-H-E-R!

And then, darkness.

From the window of the mansion, Kobayashi Sensei watched the scene unfold. His sharp eyes caught sight of Almas falling to the ground, and without hesitation, he grabbed his coat and ran out into the night. Darvish and Thomas had already started searching for her, but the night's shadows made it almost impossible to find her. Yet Kobayashi Sensei, guided by his instincts and deep connection to his student, found her crumpled form in the snow. Kneeling beside her, he placed a hand on her cold cheek.

- Almas, - he whispered, his voice firm but gentle, - I've got you.

He scooped her up in his arms, her fragile frame barely responsive. Her face was pale, her lips trembling from the cold, but there was a faint rise and fall in her chest that reassured him she was still alive. Without wasting another second, he carried her back to the mansion.

When Almas opened her eyes, the stark white of hospital walls surrounded her. The fluorescent lights above felt harsh, and the sterile smell of antiseptic was suffocating. She blinked slowly, her mind struggling to catch up with reality. The first face she saw was Mariam's, her eyes swollen from crying, but her expression softened with relief.

- Almas, you're awake, - Mariam whispered, her voice trembling. Before Almas could respond, Mariam called for the doctor. Moments later, the room filled with familiar faces—Darvish, Thomas, and Kobayashi Sensei entered alongside the doctor.

The doctor approached the bed, with calm and professional demeanor said:

- Miss Nielk, - he began, - your physical and mental health deteriorated after Mrs. Fariza's death. We had to bring you here to stabilize you. Your body and mind needed rest.

Almas's eyes welled with tears. Her voice broke as she cried out:

- She did everything to make me a leader in the eyes of society, but I've only shamed her by going crazy and ending up in a mental health clinic. She did everything for me, and I couldn't even attend her funeral. I couldn't even do my last duty to her.

Darvish stepped forward and said with steady and reassuring voice:

- Almas, you don't need to worry about any of that. This is the most private hospital in Switzerland. Patients come here from all over the world for healing, and privacy is paramount here.

The doctor nodded, his expression serious.

- Privacy is more important to me than the oath I took as a doctor. No one will know you're here unless you tell them yourself.

Mariam leaned closer, placing a comforting hand on Almas's arm.

- You're not alone, Almas. Trust me, if you don't take care of your mental health now, you won't be able to live freely in the future. Let us help you. You're the most important thing in this life that Mrs. Fariza wanted to protect. Let's us honor her final wish by taking care of you.

Thomas stood silently in the corner, with bowed head. The sorrow etched on his face spoke volumes, even though he couldn't find the words to comfort her.

Almas stood up, leaned against the wall, hugged knees in bed, and looked at the faces of the people in the room one by one as if she were seeing them for the first time. She heard what was being said to her, but could not understand. Her mind had closed off to the outside world to protect her from the trauma she was experiencing. Now she lived only in her own mind, in her thoughts. Another person who understood the seriousness of the situation was his teacher, Kobayashi Sensei. As a true teacher and warrior, he turned his face to Almas with seriousness and said to those around him without taking his eyes off her:

- Leave me alone with her, please, everyone leave the room.

Trusting his character, Darvish nodded to the people in the room to leave. He remained at the end himself, looked first at Almas, then at Sensei, and said in Japanese in a way that only the two of them could understand:

- I have infinite trust in you, Sensei. Don't leave her alone. What she needs most now is you, her guiding teacher, - and left the room.

After the doctor left the room, he invited the others to his room to explain Almas's condition to them. They went into the doctor's room together and sat down. The doctor began:

- You saw Almas for the first time today, exactly a month after the tragic incident. After examining Almas with various methods during the past month with our professional team of doctors, the diagnosis we were able to give her was *PTSD, or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*. It was important that she did not meet anyone other than us during this month. The smallest detail about her past could trigger her trauma. In order to accurately diagnose her, we observed her while she was completely cut off from the outside world and left alone with her thoughts. Since our diagnosis is now definitive, I must give you extensive information. Almas did not just lose a loved one, she saw how she died in her arms with her own eyes. *Seeing death so closely has left a permanent mark on her brain and she relives the event over and over again. It wasn't her choice, her brain was stuck in that moment, trying to do the impossible. Mrs.*

Fariza had been not only protector, but mother figure. Losing someone who meant so much to her could shatter the psychological stability of even the strongest person. The emotional pain he felt inside was compounded by the guilt he felt for not doing enough in Almas's situation, even though there was nothing she could have logically done to prevent it. Trauma destroys a person's belief that he had control over his life. Almas, who had always been strong, suddenly felt powerless. The miles she ran after the ambulance that night were her brain's desperate attempt to regain control, despite the fact that the situation was beyond her comprehension, he said, showing an electronic presentation on the screen for the room.

** What is PTSD?* - he continued his talk, showing presentation:

*- When a person is faced with a traumatic event, their brain goes into survival mode and floods the body with stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. For most people, this "alarm system" eventually passes. However, for someone with PTSD, even though the real danger has long passed, the alarm continues. When it comes to the symptoms that will be observed later, Almas may experience flashbacks, as if he feels like he is reliving the event. She may have nightmares, have difficulty sleeping, and experience uncontrollable moments of fear and anger. **These are not signs of weakness, but the brain's way of trying to protect itself,** - he said and moved on to the next slide.*

** Why does it take time?*

- Getting rid of PTSD does not mean "getting over" this disease. It has to do with the brain and body realizing that the danger has passed and that it is safe again. This requires professional therapy and, most importantly, the support of all of you. You may feel helpless at times, but the little things you do, like listening to her, reminding her that she's not alone, helping her establish routines, etc., will make a world of difference in her life. Almas needs to know that you're not a burden to her and that her feelings are natural, no matter how annoying they are.

* How can you help?

- *Don't force her to talk. Almas will talk to you when she's ready. Forcing her to open up to you before she feels comfortable may only make her withdraw further. If she says she's lost, don't try to convince her otherwise. Instead, acknowledge her pain and remind her that it's normal to feel this way. Encourage her to get back to reality, but don't rush her. Encourage her to interact with the real world at her own pace. Whether it's a walk in the park or a simple book, every little step counts,* he paused. He glanced around the room and continued:

- **PTSD is often misunderstood by people.** People think it has to do with being "*weak*" or "*overly emotional*," **but it's not. It's a natural reaction to an unnatural event. Almas's spirit is not broken, but it is hurt.** And like any wound, this spiritual wound needs care and time to heal. There will be days when she is good and days when she feels like she is back where she started. **This is normal. Her recovery from this trauma is not about erasing the past, but learning to live with it,** - he concluded his explanation. Turning off the screen and turning his face to the audience, he said:

- Almas has demonstrated extraordinary strength and willpower throughout her life. If anyone can overcome this trauma, it is Almas. But she does not have to do it alone. You are her family now. Show her that she is loved, supported and valued, **not for what she has done, but simply for who she is.**

The room was silent. Each of them felt the weight of the doctor's words. At that moment, they understood the seriousness of Almas's predicament and the roles they would play in her future life. They looked at each other and, with a look of team spirit, vowed to be Almas's pillars of support in her future life.

While the residents of the mansion spoke to the doctor, Almas was left alone with Kobayashi Sensei in the ward. Sitting on the bed, hugging her knees, Almas's gaze was fixed on her hands clasped on her knees. Although her body was there, her soul seemed to have flown far away. Her hair was disheveled, and dark shadows under eyes framed her empty eyes. She had isolated herself from the whole world. The weight of Mrs. Fariza's death had left her alone in the middle of a sea of despair.

Kobayashi Sensei, who was left alone with her, did not speak immediately. He stood silently, looking at Almas with the composure of a warrior observing the battlefield. The expression on his face was like the mask of a warrior who had learned to hide his feelings. Persuading Almas to return to the mansion had now become a mission for him. He had seen many physical battles in his life, many emotional trials, but the task of being able to help Almas seemed to him to be more difficult than all the trials he had faced. Almas was not just a student for him, but a soul he had nurtured. Now, her sorrowful withdrawal had touched the most delicate chord in her teacher's heart, reminding him of his own youth. He knew those looks well. He knew what it was like to withdraw from the world and silently accept his situation in sorrow, even when rebellions and storms were raging inside him. *After all, he himself had once...* Well, now he was thinking about only one main question: **"How can one save someone who has locked himself in his inner world?"**

Although Kobayashi Sensei's heart ached for Almas, his disciplined character did not allow this feeling of pain to take hold of him. Almas needed his guidance, not his mercy, now. His mind began to search not for words to comfort Almas, but for words that would pierce the veil of despair and rekindle the flame that had burned within him. The flame within Almas had not gone out, it had simply burned. He went to Almas and knelt down to be at a lower level than her. This was a gesture of respect in Japanese culture when conveying an important message to someone.

- Almas, - he began in a soft but serious tone, - I have not come here to give you long and eloquent advice. As your teacher, I have always been honest with you, no matter what the situation. I will not try to comfort you, because you already have a void in your soul that you will never be able to fill. But the way of a warrior is not to run away from pain when you see it, but to accept it, learn to live with it, and thus overcome it. It is a fact that while you are closed in your own world here, events in the real world will continue to flow as they should. For example, Mrs. Fariza's companies will continue to operate. Whatever Mrs. Fariza had in her life before her death will continue as it was. Except for one thing: **CHILDREN**. You have been so drowned in your own grief that you have completely forgotten them.

Almas did not answer, but the pace of her breathing changed, a sign that her teacher's words had affected her. Noticing this, Kobayashi Sensei continued, with even more serious gaze:

- ***Your sadness is certainly not weakness.*** But tell me, Almas, while you are hiding here, who will lead those children who need you? Who will teach them that their swords should be used with honor, not just force? ***Remember, you once told me that children, especially those deprived of parental care, deserve someone who will fight for their rights and their future.*** Are you now going to abandon them to their fate?

For a moment, Almas's lips parted as if to speak, but no words came out of her mouth. Her fingers gripped the hem of her hospital gown tightly. Seeing this, Kobayashi Sensei realized that he was on the right track.

- You have become not just a teacher, but a symbol to the children. You have become the Red Dragon itself in the eyes of the students. ***You were a source of hope for children who suffered silently, you showed them the way.*** You taught children born and raised in wealth, friendship and honesty, which are more important than money in life, you taught children from families with insufficient financial resources to accept help from others without embarrassing them, you completed the shortcomings because of material things, and most importantly, ***you became a light in the darkness for children who were deprived of parental care or abandoned by their parents,*** at a time when most people ignored them and left them indifferently in the darkness of life, you held their hands, ***and proved to them that they were also valuable in this life, not only to them, but to the entire country.*** Now, do you have the right to give so many children a light of hope, and then put this light out and condemn them to the darkness of life again?

Almas's shoulders trembled, although her gaze remained fixed, a single tear rolled down her cheek.

Kobayashi Sensei prepared to deliver his final blow to Almas:

- Do you remember what I taught you years ago on our first day of class? I told you that a warrior's strength lies not in his sword, but in his purpose. ***Your purpose, Almas, is greater than your sorrow,***

the power within you greater than your pain. Now is not the time to run from the pain within you, but to learn to turn it into strength and use that strength to heal the invisible wounds in the hearts of those who share your wounds. Today, I will give you two choices here. Whatever you choose as your teacher, I will respectfully accept your answer without forcing you. Now, either you will choose to remain a prisoner of the pain within you, a slave to your fears, a shadow, for the rest of your life, and hide, **or you will step outside these four walls and overcome your fears, learning to turn pain into strength and poison into medicine.** If you choose the former, I will return to Japan today and never come across you again. No, if you choose the second one, I promise you on my honor that **I will not give up this fight until I heal the wound that is bleeding in your heart, until I close the wounds in your soul, and I will not leave you or your students alone in this difficult test.** I will be by your side and support you so that you can stand with all your strength in front of your students, and while you are recovering, I will personally teach your students and I will not allow the suffering you have endured until now to be destroyed and wasted. **I promise you and that child inside who feels broken and abandoned that I will never leave her alone,** - he said and lightly placed his hand on Almas' heart.

As his teacher's hand touched his heart, Almas turned to him, her eyes meeting his for the first time. Unable to hold herself back any longer, she cried out:

- Sensei! - and hugged his teacher.

Yes, Kobayashi Sensei managed it. **It is usually easy to convince adults on any subject. It is enough to make an offer in direct proportion to their interests or goals. It is always more difficult to satisfy the child's soul inside an adult than one might think. Children who have seen betrayal, violence and lack of love from those they love since childhood, when they grow up, build impregnable fortresses to protect that child's soul and hide it behind its high walls. No profit or material wealth can destroy these walls. There is only one way to conquer the fortress, and its door must be opened from the inside by the child inside. This is possible only with true love and compassion. The child's soul**

imprisoned inside will only open that door and hand over the key to the person who comes. Kobayashi Sensei, with the deep feeling of care that a teacher has for his student, managed to break through all the barriers in Almas's mind, convey his message to that child, and convince her of his sincerity.

Kobayashi Sensei wiping Almas's tears said:

- **The time for crying is over, Almas. We will rise again and overcome this trial together.** Just as you are the teacher of your students, remember that I am also your teacher. **In Iaido, the bond between a teacher and a student is eternal until the end of their lives, it has no end.** Just as you do not leave your students alone on the dark paths of fate, I could not leave you alone as your teacher in this difficult trial. A new life will begin for you from tomorrow, and now rest well, - he said, laying her down, covered her, stroked her hair, and left the room, saying goodbye.

Everyone was waiting for him outside with great excitement. Seeing that they were waiting for an answer, Kobayashi Sensei's face smiled, his dark eyes narrowed sincerely. Everyone looked at each other and smiled.

The next day, the black Q7 silently drove along the winding road towards the mansion. Almas sat in the back, her face pressed to the window, watching the familiar landscape that now seemed like an unfamiliar painting. The high iron gates, the vast garden, and the magnificent silhouette of the mansion, all of this now felt like a distant memory as if it belonged not to her, but to someone else. A feeling of heaviness, reluctance, and compulsion reigned in her heart. Although the air was cool outside, Almas felt as if she was suffocating. When the car stopped in front of the majestic entrance door, Almas began to fear. She was not ready to face the empty corridors where Mrs. Fariza's voice had once echoed, and now to walk through the rooms where her spirit seemed to roam. Although her legs did not want to move when Thomas opened the door, the gaze of Kobayashi Sensei standing at the top of the stairs gave her strength. As soon as she got out of the car, the wind ruffled her hair, whispering memories of the past into her ear. At the top of the stairs, she hesitated to take a step. Memories filled her mind like a movie scene: Mrs. Fariza's laughter at the tea table, her stern but loving

guidance, the plans they shared for the future, and so on. Each memory was like a needle piercing her fragile heart.

- Almas, - Kobayashi Sensei's voice scattered her thoughts like a cloud of dust, - You're home now, - he said.

Home. The word felt so foreign to her now. As if it no longer belonged to her. She clenched her fists and tried to control the trembling of her hands. Each step felt heavier than the last. It was as if she was stepping into a house of fear, not the loving home she had lived in for years. The magnificent front door opened, and the familiar floors and the faint scent of white roses greeted her. The silent space inside the mansion told her that Mrs. The thought of Fariza's absence deepened the pain in her heart. She slowly walked through the main entrance and down the long corridors. Her eyes rested on the paintings hanging on the walls under the echoes of her footsteps. Each of the paintings reminded her of the woman who had founded this empire. She stopped in front of one of the paintings which was Mrs. Fariza's favorite one. It was a depiction of the Felix reborn from ashes and spreading its wings into the air. Almas's eyes were filled with tears. She reached out and touched the edge of the frame,

- I'm not ready for this, - she whispered.

Kobayashi Sensei, who was standing behind her, said in a gentle tone:

- This mansion is not just a place, Almas. This is as much a part of you as it is Mrs. Fariza's legacy. You are no longer walking towards an empty house, but towards your goal.

His words ignited the fire that had been smoldering in Almas's heart like a spark. The teacher added:

- **You don't have to carry everything at once. But you have to take the first step.**

Almas nodded, looking at her teacher with childlike innocence. She continued walking. Her steps led her to Mrs. Fariza's office. Yes, now she was standing in front of Mrs. Fariza's office, which was once the heart of the mansion. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and entered. Contrary to her expectations, there was no trace of any melancholy in the room. The curtains were neatly pulled back, and the sun was shining with all its light, illuminating every corner of

the room with golden light. Her eyes glanced at the leather rug on the floor, at the table in front of the window. She sat down in Mrs. Fariza's place and scanned the entire room. She now realized better that this room was surrounded from head to toe by hundreds of books arranged on long shelves. Hundreds of books that she had never read. Oh God, look at what stories, lessons, and information lay in these books that she did not know. Mrs. Since Fariza's office was usually dimly lit, these books on the outer walls of the room had escaped Almas's attention until now. Since Mrs. Fariza kept these books in her study, not in the library, they must have had a special place for her. Almas seemed to have fallen into a magical world. She stood up and came to the center of the room. She walked slowly around it and smiled. The people in the mansion did not know how to react to Almas's behavior. Sensing their anxiety, Almas said:

- Don't worry, I'm fine. I will live in this room from now on, Mariam. I ask you to bring a small single bed here. This room carries Mrs. Fariza's spirit. I want to live here for a while, immerse myself in the books she read, and understand her inner world more deeply. I want to start over, not to escape Mrs. Fariza's memories, but to better understand and keep her legacy alive. This room is the only place in this mansion where memories can turn into passion and inspiration for the future, not sadness. Please try to understand me.

The others, remembering the advice the doctor had given them about Almas's psychological condition, nodded silently in agreement. **And so Almas's life began to rise from the ashes in the room where Mrs. Fariza had once breathed her last.** This room became Almas's refuge, a world within a world where time flowed differently. The books on the high shelves, once silent observers of Mrs. Fariza's empire, now became Almas's closest allies on the path to recovery. Every morning, as the first rays of sunlight filtered through the long panoramic windows, she would wake up eager for a new adventure in the books. Her desire to learn, to know, and to grow became her mainstay, pulling her away from the dark abyss of grief.

With her delicate hands and constant kindness, Mariam became a new figure in Almas's life who could give her motherly love. Every morning, she would comb Almas's hair with the caress of a mother who cared for her child, caress her, and talk sweetly to her. She would pay attention to Almas's physical health, nutrition, and

especially taking her medications on time. With her presence, *Almas did not miss motherly caress.*

On this path, Darvish became her intellectual discussion partner. Every evening, in the candlelit room, they would have heated discussions about the new book Almas was reading, from philosophy to art, architecture, and human psychology, and they would play chess. Darvish had found a way to challenge Almas's way of thinking and force her to delve into topics she had not yet considered. *Thus, he was able to fill the void of Mrs. Fariza's spiritual mentorship to Almas.*

Always a thoughtful friend, Thomas brought Almas a gift in a small box one rainy afternoon. When she opened the box, a female kitten with blue eyes like tiny beads and gray and white stripes came out. The cat's soft body and playful behavior added unexpected fun to Almas's world. She named it Mrs. Beads because its eyes resembled a pair of beads. Mrs. Beads quickly became her best friend and spent 24 hours with her. This little creature satisfied Almas's need to share her love. She took care of the cat every day, talking and playing with it for hours, and even sleeping with it.

Kobayashi Sensei was a pillar of strength in her new life. He strengthened Almas not only in physical training but also in mental discipline. He told her about the successes of her students. Almas took a special interest in the life stories of each of her students, wanting to know everything about the children she would lead when the time came. ***She cherished the handmade cards that her students made for her and wrote letters to them in return. Even though they could not see their legendary teachers for a long time, correspondence with them continued to inspire them. In this way, she could reduce the guilt she felt towards her students by supporting them, even from a distance.***

The therapy sessions she had with doctor, although difficult, were one of the most fundamental stones in her recovery. In each session, she faced the pain she had buried deep in soul, removing layers of sadness and fear. This process was slow, often painful, but necessary, over the course of a year. The gentle nature of the lady who was her therapist, and the trusting relationship they created between them led to her recovery, perhaps ten times faster and

better than that of people who normally suffer from this type of trauma.

Thus, at the end of a year, although the study was still Almas's little world in the mansion, she had already begun to establish contact with the outside world - having breakfast with Mariam in a restaurant, drinking coffee in picturesque places, then going shopping, taking short trips with Darvish both within the country and sometimes to neighboring countries, going to museums, spending more time in nature with Thomas and Mrs. Beads, in short, *loving and living life again. Of course, Almas's main motivation in all this was to be a worthy successor to Mrs. Fariza.*

After consulting with her doctor and Kobayashi Sensei, Darvish came to Almas's room one evening, bringing a box with him. Almas recognized this box as soon as she saw it. It was the box Mrs. Fariza had given her the night she passed away. Although the memories she had thought she had forgotten revived, they could not take hold of her now healed spirit. Darvish approached the door and said:

- I will stand behind the door. Mrs. Fariza had ordered to see the contents of this box in private, - he said, and left the room.

Almas looked at the box hesitantly. If it had been the old Almas, she would have thrown the box into the fire in anger and burned it. *But now she has changed.*

A sense of curiosity overwhelmed her. I wonder why Mrs. Fariza had insisted so much about this box? She had officially made me her child and heir, giving me her billions of fortune. What else could be in this box that could surprise me? - she thought, and opened the box.

Inside was an envelope with Mrs. Fariza's personal seal on it, the edges slightly worn. This was a method used as proof that she had read the letter for the first time. She broke the wax seal on the envelope's closure, took out the paper inside the envelope. She recognized the writing on the paper as soon as saw it. It was Mrs. Fariza's writing, neat as pearls:

My dear Almas,

If you are reading this letter, it means that it is time for you to take on more responsibility on the path you set out on with a pure purpose. You will find the key to the dark truths of the world we live in and the main key to this struggle that I believe only you can continue by searching simultaneously in your two favorite spots on Earth. Find that key and use it. Through the key, you will understand who the real enemies you have to fight in this world are. As your mother, my last wish for you is to **save and protect those who are crushed under the oppression of those enemies and cannot protect themselves**, to defeat the enemies. You already have enough strength for this. Find the key, take a deep breath and let your heart guide you. Trust yourself and know that I will continue to be by your side on this path, even if I am no longer living in this life...

Who loves you with all my heart,

Your Mother Fariza

When Almas finished reading the letter, her brain was about to explode with thought. *Which key? Which war? Which enemy? How could I search for it in two places on Earth at the same time? How was such a thing physically possible?* If Mrs. Fariza were alive, I would have said that she was either playing with my mind or testing me to gauge my intellectual level. She nervously put her head between hands and began to think, her eyes wandering. Suddenly, a globe on the table caught her attention.

- ***The Earth!*** - she said to himself. She got up from the chair she was sitting in and immediately approached the desk. First, she held the globe up in the air and looked at it in the light. It didn't look like something was hidden inside. Then she started thinking about other words. Where could ***"the two most beloved places on Earth"*** be? - she thought, and began to look at the countries one by one. Suddenly, a very small detail caught her attention. Underneath the name of each country's capital was a small, round button. She knew that this was

not a geographical symbol. As she ran finger over one of them, she noticed how her index finger fit perfectly into the space. When she placed thumb in the space, a red light came on under the button. The logic of this puzzle became clear to her at that moment. These buttons were sensors that read fingerprints. Now it was turn to find two countries. One of the countries could definitely be **Japan**, the other **Switzerland**. When she placed thumbs on the sensors above both countries at the same time, the red light under the button turned green. *These sensors were designed to be opened only with Almas's fingerprints, to protect the object hidden inside the globe from being taken by someone else.* After the sensors were activated, a small object fell from under the globe onto the table. It was a USB flash card hidden inside the globe. Seeing the red dragon emblem on it, Almas realized that this was the key she was looking for. She immediately took the USB card in hand and went behind the computer and plugged it into the computer. At that moment, a list of files with many strange names appeared in front of her eyes. In addition to these files, there was only one video file. Realizing that this video file, which name was **"Introduction"**, should be opened first, Almas clicked on the file and started the video. On the screen, an image of Mrs. Fariza. taken behind the desk where Almas was currently sitting appeared.

- Almas, my beautiful daughter, - she began to speak, hearing her voice and seeing her face again was like a balm to Almas's aching heart. With the innocence of a child, she ran her hand over her face on the screen and, "Mother," - she said softly.

- If you are watching this video, it means that I am no longer with you. But know that from now on, I will be your guide in every step you take. I ordered this USB to be prepared by the most powerful hacker group in the world with a code that no one but you can open. The files here will allow you to view web files in a system that changes its IP address every 10 seconds. Technically, these files are designed in a way that makes it impossible to find your address, or to remotely access them. The team I have assembled from the world's most powerful hackers will always support you in this, but unless you choose to reveal your identity, they will not be able to know who you are. Your safety on this dangerous journey was my priority. I have prepared these files to show you the dark truths of the world that I have uncovered in the last year of my life, the

injustices and the battles that must be fought. Since you have become a warrior in this life and have chosen to lead children lost in the dark paths of life from darkness to light, then you must begin this battle knowing the enemies and dangers that you will encounter in this dark labyrinth. Most of the people who will be considered your real enemies are actually wolves in sheep's clothing. I will explain to you, one by one, who they are, the terrible deeds they have committed, where they get their power from and how to destroy them by hitting them at their weakest points, in the most detailed way, with these files and files that I have hidden in various parts of the world. The day I learned that I had only a few days left to live, I realized that I could not leave you alone among these *monsters*. While you, as a person, were developing as a young lady in the eyes of the country's public, the media, and the international business world for your future image, I have been preparing too for this war in detail behind the scenes for your struggle in a way that you cannot even imagine. This is an *invisible war*, and I hope that you will be the winner of this war. No matter what the conditions, I believe in you, - the video ended.

Almas, whose heart would almost jump out of seat with excitement as soon as the video ended, froze in place, still staring at the blank black image on the screen. Mrs. Fariza had sacrificed the last year of her life to prepare her for a mission that was more important than she had imagined. Not for a primitive reason like being a "worthy candidate" to manage the wealth that Mrs. Fariza had bequeathed to her, but with the power of the materiality and wisdom she had given her, using the image she had in society and the international world as a mask as a means of protection, she had prepared for a higher purpose like being able to *penetrate the deepest depths of his enemies, becoming someone they would never suspect and naturally, since they did not know his true identity, unable to harm him, and saving children who were being oppressed*. It was as if an enlightenment had occurred in Almas's mind.

- So, everything had a meaning, everything... Even the most meaningless detail was a step taken specifically by Mrs. Fariza, - she thought.

She closed her eyes and imagined herself. Who had she become in these last years, what kind of image? Despite her young age, a young

scholar respected in the academic world in her field, a beloved teacher of students, on the other hand, a philanthropist who taught children one of the rarest martial arts with the philosophies of discipline and self-development, a philanthropic **young woman who took care of children despite their financial means, especially those deprived of parental care**, and finally, a powerful architect and businesswoman who was the sole owner of a billion-dollar business empire. When Almas's naturally self-respecting character and her reputation in society were added to all this, who could have doubted such an image? Almas's loyalty, respect and admiration for Mrs. Fariza's farsighted policies and mind increased tenfold. Returning from her thoughts to the real world, Almas opened her eyes again and stared at the computer screen. A sense of curiosity and doubt had already begun to occupy her mind. She moved the cursor over the "X" sign and closed the video file. There was an ocean of encrypted files in the queue, each with a different, mysterious, strange name. She held her breath and tried to open the first file, but was met with a small screen that asked for the password. Not knowing the password, she pressed the "X" and moved the cursor down. Finally, she saw the folder called **"Unlock the Dragon"**. It was the only folder without a password. When she opened the folder, she found only one audio file inside. When she played the file, she recognized the voice she heard immediately. It was Mrs. Fariza speaking in her usual reserved, kind, but commanding manner.

- **To uncover the truth of the present, you must first be able to hear the whispers of the past. The dragon's fire burns brightest when it is fed by justice. The second key to the puzzle is hidden in the spark of the most innocent flame. Trust your instincts and find it**, my daughter.

Almas, who did not understand the message the first time, listened to it again.

- **The most innocent spark of fire** - she whispered to himself. This clue began to gnaw at her brain. She looked around frantically. Her brain began to recall and analyze every word Mrs. Fariza had ever said to her, every memory about her.

"The most innocent spark of fire" had to be connected to something that came from the beginning. That is, the place where everything

related to the "Red Dragon" first began. *Where did this whole concept, this idea begin?* This expression had to be divided into two parts. **The spark was the beginning of this whole idea, but what was the most innocent flame?** When the words innocence flashed through her mind, she involuntarily remembered **children**. Children, innocence, the moment when everything began... - she thought, and then

- BOOK! - she shouted loudly, without even realizing it. She immediately searched the shelves and found a children's book called **"The Legend of the Red Dragon"** that she had read many years ago. She wiped the dust off the book and started flipping through the pages. On the one hand, she was trying to visualize the whole story in her mind. *I think I found the answer*, - she thought and quickly opened the part describing the little girl's first encounter with the Red Dragon in the cave.

"There was something special about her, something the Red Dragon could never ignore - **Unity**"

Almas had no doubts, the password could not be anything else. She took the book with returned to the computer. As soon as Almas entered the password in a hurry, the file opened. Inside the opened folder were all kinds of videos, documents, and maps. To understand exactly what it was, she opened one of the video files. The video had no sound. It was just a black and white image. In the video, two uniformed warehouse workers were carrying something inside a black vinyl bag. It was as if the images were a cut from a security camera recording. Suddenly, one of the workers dropped the bag from his hand and at that moment something dangled out of the bag, something like a tail. When Almas zoomed in and watched the video, her blood froze for a moment. **It was a baby's hand**. Then the other worker reached in and took the bag. He "buzzed" it near the other bags inside the container full of similar bags. Almas, not wanting to believe what she was seeing, began to check the next files. The next, the next, the next, the pictures, **the looks in the eyes of the children in the pictures, what had happened to them, oh God, what a tragedy these children had experienced?**

As she watched the images, Almas's heart sank, she covered mouth with one hand and continued to check the files with the other. When

she realized the darkness she had entered, tears flowed from eyes and cold sweat flowed from her body. Unable to bear it any longer, she closed the screen and began to sob. As she cried, she began to choke and cough. Her hands trembled, trying to regain his composure by taking a sip of water from the table. She took a deep breath. She opened the computer screen again and began to check the files again. It was clear what these were. Now the main thing was to understand where and by whom these tragedies had been committed. As she read the names on the list and looked at the files prepared like CVs, the sadness on her face was replaced by anger. Oh God, Almas had probably never felt so angry in her life. But she controlled anger with the will of a warrior and went through every file in this folder, down to the last one. *The sense of discipline she had learned in laido over the years had paid off now*. Closing the screen, she stared at a single point in thought. This state lasted for exactly an hour and a half without her even noticing. Even though she was sitting completely still, thoughts were surging through his mind, replacing one another. Finally, the anger on her face was replaced by a sense of determination:

- DARVISH, - she called out to him in a calm but determined voice.

As soon he was called out, Darvish, who had just been standing ready behind the door, entered the room. Without saying anything, he approached and stood in front of Almas's back. Almas, did not take her eyes off the dimmed computer screen, said without looking at him:

- A week later, we will organize an invitation to celebrate the second anniversary of the establishment of the Red Dragon Society, dedicated to the dear memory of Mrs. Fariza. Send invitations immediately to the people on the list I give you and make sure that everyone comes, - she said, turning her face to him.

- ***EVERYONE!*** - she repeated with a firm and cruel look.

Darvish looked Almas in the eye without saying a single word. He bowed the way he had done to Mrs. Fariza only in the past and quietly left the room.

Almas, left alone again, leaned back in his chair and turned left and right, lost in thought. *Who knows what other disgusting acts were inside this USB card, evidence of how many innocent babies were*

subjected to cruelty. **BUT WHAT ABOUT THE THOSE WHO ARE NOT WRITTEN HERE? WHAT ABOUT THE ACROSSMENTS THAT ARE HAPPENING IN THE ALL OF THE WORLD? HOW COULD SHE HEAR THEIR VOICES AND HELP THEM?** She thought all day about what to do next. With the financial power she had, she could buy even any small country on earth. This power would certainly be enough to build a good future for all of them after saving the children. Although the information Mrs. Fariza had gathered was relevant, it would take a lot of time, tactics, and attention to solve them. **BUT HOW COULD THE OTHER CHILDREN IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE WORLD BE CONNECTED WITH ALL OF THEM AT THE SAME TIME IN ORDER TO NOT FALL INTO THE TRAP?** As these questions swirled in her mind, Almas kept repeating one word aloud: **MORE! She needed to help more children, and if possible, set up a system where those in need around the world could communicate with her directly.** But how could she do this without exposing herself or arousing suspicion? **It had to be a tool that only the oppressed knew about, and that would allow them to pass on secret messages to each other while preserving their confidentiality.** After hours of thinking, she found the answer again in the book "The Legend of the Red Dragon."

"The dragon spoke to each of the children one-on-one. The children showed it their deepest wounds that they had never showed anyone before, and told their most hidden secrets, and lightened the weight of their spiritual burdens."

Almas closed the book and placed it on her heart, hugging it. **This ordinary children's fairytale, which author was not even obviously known, would touch so many lives, save them from oppression, and inspire someone to become a friend, a confidant with whom children could simply share their secrets.** At that moment, all the pain, sadness, and anger in Almas's heart were replaced by feelings of love, gratitude, and care. She knew exactly what to do. She opened computer's screen and created a website called The Secrets of the Red Dragon. On the home screen, she placed an illustration of a dragon with flames coming out of its eyes

and staring at the screen. Under it, she simply placed a question box.
The box contained a single sentence:

**THE RED DRAGON OPENED ITS EYES, WHICH SECRET WILL
YOU SHARE?**

The End of the First Book

A letter from your closest friend to you

My dear friend, if you have taken the time to read and finish my book among hundreds of works, then I can trust you and address you more sincerely.

First of all, I would like to tell you a little about myself. More precisely, about the reason and purpose of writing this book. First of all, I would like to convey with all my sincerity that **I have written this book with all my heart, passion and deep feelings. Therefore, this work carries a small particle of my soul.** I cannot allow the work that I have written with such pure and clean feelings to be trampled under the “dirty feet of their soul” by anyone. That is why I have decided to keep my work away from **money and fame**, which are the two blessings of this mortal world.

I want you to believe in my sincerity from all my heart that I did not do this work to make money by selling books or to become famous.

This work came about naturally, as a rebellion of my soul, when I was going through the most difficult moments of my life, when I could no longer bear what was happening. Since I knew myself, I not only loved books, but breathed in them. **Books have been my close friends in every moment of my life.** May be that's why chose to help children by writing a book. Poets or artists could understand me better about this. Writing a work of fiction is not something you can sit down and decide in advance. When inspiration strikes, you just pick up a pen and write without thinking about anything. It's as if the paper and pen themselves magically guide you about what to write. This magical process continues, completing the letter, the word, the sentence, and the whole page. As I mentioned above, I wrote this work during one of the most difficult moments of my life. Spiritually, when I was fluttering like a butterfly caught in a spider's web, sinking to the bottom of the water, and seconds before I could breathe, **I realized that if I didn't save myself, no one would come to my aid.** I fought with all my might and broke the “net of self-doubt”, pushed myself up from the bottom of the “ocean of sorrow”. I made radical decisions about my future life. Writing this work was a “life-saving circle” that my mind gave me to escape from that

moment. **Writing this work is, first of all, to heal the wounds of myself, the child inside me.** This is the main reason for writing this book. Anyway, that's enough about myself. Let's talk a little about you, my dear friend.

Yes, we are not physically acquainted with you, and maybe we won't be until the end of your life. Maybe when you read this work in a cafe, at a bus stop, at the airport on your phone, tablet or notebook, you will sit next to me without knowing that I am the author of the work you are reading. Just as there are positive sides to fame, I know very well the negative sides on the other side of the medallion. **That is why I say with all my sincerity that unlike many people in the world, I do not want to be famous.** I do not want anyone to take a picture with me or to get an autograph. If I ever see someone reading a work by someone I do not know, instead of introducing myself, I say, "I am the author of this work," and I say, "It seems like an interesting work, they say, the second part will be even more interesting," and leave with a smile.

We do not need to meet you physically, because I know you spiritually from your scars.

Sometimes, when you have done your best all day in every way and come home, sometimes in your room, sometimes in the bathroom, sometimes when you are sure that no one is watching, and you cannot hold back your tears anymore, **I want to be there for you.**

When you are physically abused and beaten by your parents for the smallest, unnecessary mistake, or when you are subjected to moral violence and insults and feel helpless, alone, and helpless, **I want to be there for you.**

I want to be there for you when you feel humiliated by people you call friends, sometimes by your school, university or work colleagues.

When you try to spend a whole month on the same bill that others effortlessly paid for just one dinner at a fancy restaurant and the feeling of injustice that this gives you chokes you, **I want to be there for you.**

*When you feel helpless when you can't get what you need, can't go where you want to go, **I want to be there for you.***

When you experience the traumas that an alcoholic or substance-addicted relative "gave" you, **I want to be there for you.**

Why I want to be there for you?

Because I have carried the same or very similar scars at some point and **I know what it is to survive alone through these difficulties.** **I don't want you to experience this in life alone.** I want you to remember one thing, **YOU ARE MY NOBODY, BUT AT THE SAME TIME YOU ARE MY DEAREST ONE!** I know how hard it is for you to truly trust someone. I ask your permission to enter your spiritual world and be a guest in your soul, mind, and heart.

Please allow me! Allow me to wipe your tears, even if not physically, when you cry, spiritually, hug you, lift you up when you fall, be your back, your support in difficult times!

Wherever you are in the world, I want you to be sure that even if no one else is, I personally think of you, I want to take care of you and I LOVE YOU.

Just as you are, regardless of your religion, race and gender.

If you have noticed, I have not given any information about what country, nationality or religion I am from in this work. There is only one reason for this.

I WANT PEOPLE TO BE INSPIRED BY MY WORK, NOT BY ME PERSONALLY!

I would rather die than see the work "polluted" by the negative thoughts of the person who reads this work that I wrote with all my soul and sincerity, just because of my country, nationality and religion.

If you really want to imagine what I am like in real life, imagine me as a little girl walking on the ocean shore. I consider myself as a little girl trying to save and bring back to life dolphins who committed suicide on the ocean shore, and my readers are pure, cheerful creatures like dolphins. Because even dolphins, the most cheerful creatures of nature, commit suicide because they cannot withstand the cruelty of this life. **Even if I cannot save them all, I will send**

every dolphin I come across back to the ocean as long as I live and am able. If you know and remember me like this, that is enough.

This book is a gift from me to you completely free of charge, my dear friend. You can download and read it from anywhere in the world without paying any money.

You don't owe me anything, if you feel gratitude to me in your heart, in return, **treat yourself better, love yourself, this is the greatest gift to me.** Buy yourself a coffee or herbal tea, for example. Go for a walk in the nature of the area where you live, listen to music, dance, have fun and **just be happy!** Believe me, **I have no other desire from you.**

The main purpose of my work is to be a source of hope, motivation and inspiration for people going through difficult times in life. This is a work that will remain true to this purpose not only when I am alive in this world, but also many years after I leave this world.

The second and more realistic purpose of writing the work is to protect the anonymity of those who cannot make their voices heard for various reasons, to inform the public about the physical or moral oppression they are subjected to, and to shape public opinion. This work, which you have just finished reading, serves as an introduction to better understand the second book, which will be the main part. The heroes of my work are not “superheroes with superhuman powers that come from the unseen”, it is a story based on real life. It is not magical powers that bring a poor, newly graduated student girl to the top, but the heart of a compassionate stranger who recognizes the purity in her soul and extends a helping hand to her. **I think that is what real magic is.** Although the RED DRAGON is just a mythical character, its ideology is real.

THE RED DRAGON is not just a book character. **IT IS A SMALL PART OF A LARGE-SCALE REAL CHARITY PROJECT.**

The website designed by Almas at the end of the book **is real, open to anyone who wants to enter it and share the physical or moral violence that person has suffered.**

My dear friend, even if there is no one in this world you can trust, **I am here for you.**

Although I cannot help you physically with the help of this work I have written, I want to help you spiritually and give you a new world in your mind where you will feel safe, an image you can trust.

The Red Dragon is here for you.

Just as in the fairy tale, its overheard the children's secrets and took revenge, **I promise to learn your secrets and tell the whole world about it by protecting your privacy.**

THE RED DRAGON IS HERE BECAUSE YOU EXIST!

THIS IS FOR YOU!

As I mentioned above, **I have no material or moral expectations from you.**

So, **let's write the second part of the book together,** let's be the voice of the voiceless like you, like me, like US, let's be the back, support, and help of those who need help by bringing their voice to the whole world!

Together, we are not a small group, but an **EMPIRE!** I will do everything I can until my last breath to support each other and bring your voice to the whole world.

On this path, I ask nothing from you except your friendship and trust. Who knows, maybe one day I can open my wounds and show you...

And now, click the link below and answer:

THE RED DRAGON OPENED ITS EYES, WHICH SECRET WILL YOU SHARE?

<https://secretsofthereddragon.com/>